








EX LIBRIS  
UNIVERSITATIS  
ALBERTENSIS

---

The Bruce Peel  
Special Collections  
Library



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2025 with funding from  
University of Alberta Library

<https://archive.org/details/0162016036780>











**University of Alberta**

**Library Release Form**

**Name of Author:** Racquel Tania Wood

**Title of Thesis:** Aboriginal Women's Identity Processes:  
Threads of Experience From the Midst of Unfolding Lives

**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

**Year this Degree Granted:** 2001

Permission is hereby granted to the University of Alberta Library to reproduce single copies of this thesis and to lend or sell such copies for private, scholarly or scientific research purposes only.

The author reserves all other publication and other rights in association with the copyright in the thesis, and except as herein provided, neither the thesis nor any substantial portion thereof may be printed or otherwise reproduced in any material form whatever without the author's prior written permission.





University of Alberta

Aboriginal Women's Identity Processes:  
Threads of Experience From the Midst of Unfolding Lives

by

Racquel Tania Wood



A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

Counselling Psychology

Department of Educational Psychology

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 2001





**University of Alberta**

**Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research**

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled **Aboriginal Women's Identity Processes: Threads of Experience From the Midst of Unfolding Lives** submitted by Racquel Tania Wood in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Counselling Psychology.





## DEDICATION

*For my father,  
who taught me how to tell stories.*

*For my mother,  
who taught me how to live them ...*



## ABSTRACT

Narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; 1994; 2000) was utilized to explore how women of Aboriginal ancestry have constructed a more coherent and desired sense of who they are, and who they want to become, in their stories of self. Narrative concepts of identity (Bateson, 1989; Carr, 1986; Heilbrun, 1988, White, 1997) comprised the lens through which three Aboriginal women's life stories of experience were viewed and interpreted.

Three participants were utilized in this study. They were chosen specifically because they were Aboriginal women who had not yet attained community recognition as Elders, although they seemed to be outwardly engaged in a process of constructing better lives for themselves. They were chosen because they were women in the midst of living their multi-layered and complex lives.

It seemed of justifiable importance to develop a sense of how Aboriginal women have re-authored more empowering, self-accepting, and coherent identity-stories, since this population of minority women have often lived a duality of experiences. They have both a rich cultural tradition and a well-documented legacy of having been historically and socially embedded in oppressive contexts.

A review of literature on Aboriginal women's identity experiences revealed a growing body of information regarding the complex difficulties Aboriginal women have so often experienced. However very little documentation existed that richly illuminated a sense of how Aboriginal women, in the midst of their lives, have created identities of success, empowerment, and coherence -- despite the difficulties.





A series of collaborative-conversational interviews centered on the open-ended question, “Looking back over your life, what stories would you tell in order to explain your sense of who you are?” The stories of experience were analyzed for narrative threads slicing across the women’s experiential identity processes.

Within the research text are four “narratives of experience”. One is a narrative portrait of myself, the researcher. The other three are my narrative portraits of each participant. These pieces are illuminating of the unique identity process that each woman seemed to engage in over the holistic unfolding of her life.

Four shared identity process threads stood out as illuminating of how these women gradually, and inventively, shifted their identities from confusing and fragmented beginnings to more coherent and desired identity-stories. Implications resonate for counselling and future research with minority women.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As always, I cherish my family, here and gone, for the richness of experience we shared and lived together. Every story has brought me here.

I thank the three inspiring women who participated in this narrative inquiry. The success of this present work is firmly situated in their willingness to share so candidly from their richly textured lives. I carry great regard for the kindness and courage these women so obviously live by.

I wish to extend my sincere gratitude to the committee of individuals who expressed an interest in this narrative inquiry. Opportunities for consultation, encouragement, and gentle guidance have helped me experience, and produce, a research study that has served to deepen my commitment to the principles and practices I want to stand for in my professional ~ personal life.





## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER ONE:</b>	
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
The Research Question.....	4
Reasons For This Inquiry.....	6
Overview Of The Text.....	7
 <b>CHAPTER TWO:</b>	
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>9</b>
Narrative Concepts Of Identity.....	11
Aboriginal Women's Experiences.....	21
How and Why These Concepts and Experiences Informed This Research.....	23
 <b>CHAPTER THREE:</b>	
<b>HOW NARRATIVE INQUIRY METHODOLOGY INFORMED MY RESEARCH PRACTICE.....</b>	<b>26</b>
Narrative Inquiry Methodology As Related To My Research.....	26
Collection Of The Narratives.....	28
Analysis Of The Narratives.....	33
Writing The Narrative Research Text.....	37
Why Narrative Inquiry?.....	40
What Makes This A Good Narrative Inquiry?.....	42
Inviting Participation: How I Met and Chose The Women.....	44
Ethical Considerations.....	46



<b>CHAPTER FOUR:</b>	
<b>NARRATIVES OF EXPERIENCE: RACQUEL.....</b>	<b>50</b>
 <b>CHAPTER FIVE:</b>	
<b>NARRATIVES OF EXPERIENCE: DINA</b>	
<b>THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A PIONEER.....</b>	<b>56</b>
 <b>CHAPTER SIX:</b>	
<b>NARRATIVES OF EXPERIENCE: AUDREY</b>	
<b>VISION QUEST --- VISION CREATION.....</b>	<b>124</b>
 <b>CHAPTER SEVEN:</b>	
<b>NARRATIVES OF EXPERIENCE: AMY</b>	
<b>ON BECOMING A TEACHER.....</b>	<b>166</b>
 <b>CHAPTER EIGHT:</b>	
<b>REFLECTIONS WITH NARRATIVE THREADS.....</b>	<b>201</b>
A Comment On Multi-Layered Learning.....	202
Narrative Identity Process Thread: From Very Early On They Tried To Live Life By An Identity That Made Sense.....	205
Narrative Identity Process Thread: When They Moved Away From Taken-For-Granted Scripts, They Lived Outside Identity-Scripts, A Difficult, But Necessary, In-Between Part Of Their Process.....	208
Narrative Identity Process Thread: They Experienced Gradual Awakenings That Strengthened Their Resolve To Figure Out And Create More Coherent and Desired Identity-Scripts.....	212
Narrative Identity Process Thread: They Each Shifted From An Identity-As-A-Search Process To A More Empowering Identity-As-A-Creation Process.....	214
Implications For Counselling.....	219
Considerations For Future Research.....	220
A Closing Comment On Being and Becoming.....	221





<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>223</b>
<b>APPENDIX.....</b>	<b>228</b>



## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

*Stories are inhabitations. We live in and through stories. They conjure worlds.  
We do not know the world other than as story world. Stories inform life ...  
We inhabit the great stories of our culture. We live through stories.  
We are 'lived' by the stories of our race and place.*

*(Mair, 1988, p. 127)*

From the closing chapters of their lives, Aboriginal Elders have emphasized that the oral traditions of their rich culture, and the medicine stories flowing from such contexts, have prophetically shaped the authoring of their own life-stories (Wood, 1996). From their wisdom imbued years of experience, the Elders have said that their stories are their wealth (Cruikshank, 1990). Some Elders have even said, with warm satisfaction, that they lived their life like a story (Cruikshank). It can therefore be argued, especially from the Aboriginal perspective, that stories sustain our sense of self or, through their lack of coherence, confuse our sense of who it is we are. Aboriginal women have echoed, and lived, this dual sentiment. However, many Aboriginal women, speaking from the midst of living their storylines, echo the other, more painful implication, of struggling to live a life that makes sense in the face of story fragments born out of abusive, oppressive, and confusing contexts (Hilden, 1995; LaRocque, 1990; Perreault & Vance, 1990; Wiebe & Johnson, 1998). For Aboriginal women in the midst of living their lives, the process of trying to make sense of who they are, and who they want to become, has often been a process fraught with ravaging incoherence and non-sensical realities.





*From "The Face of Old Woman"*

*There are women everywhere with fragments  
when we learn to come together we are whole ...  
we will come to recognize what we need to know  
to learn how to come together ...*

*I walk amidst shards  
and fear laceration ...*

*I am falling  
I am falling*

*past star  
past time  
through space  
and my own fragments*

*oh sisters the pain*

*I am scattered  
I am scattered*

*gather fragments  
weave and mend  
scattered fragments  
weave and mend ...*

*There are Women everywhere with fragments*

*gather fragments  
weave and mend ...*

*(From Cameron's 1981, Daughters of Copper Woman, p. 147-148)*

Women of Aboriginal ancestry have often inherited, and inhabited, a dual legacy. On the one hand, Aboriginal women have often found sustenance and strength in living a life deeply immersed in their rich cultural and oral storytelling



tradition. The importance of this tradition has been emphasized by respected Aboriginal Elders, as they explained the crucial role of cultural and family stories in shaping a more coherent sense of identity (Cruikshank, 1990; Meili, 1991; Wood, 1996).

However, for many Aboriginal women, there also exists a well-documented legacy of another sort -- this being their historical experience of having been legally marginalized and socially disempowered (Bartlett, 1988). More specifically, there exists a growing body of documentation that speaks of life experiences commonly punctuated by painful losses, separations, abuses, and not surprisingly -- identity confusion (Archibald, 1992; Hilden, 1995; LaRocque, 1990; Perreault & Vance, 1990; Wiebe & Johnson, 1998; Wyrstok, 1997). With a legacy such as this, the inevitable wondering then becomes, how do Aboriginal women “weave and mend” (Cameron, 1981) a meaningful coherent life from their fragmented remains?

Yet, curiously missing from the literature, are stories told by Aboriginal women, which speak to this important question. Missing are the narratives of experience reflective of how Aboriginal women, in the midst of living their lives, have managed to triumph over these non-sensical contexts and create more preferred identity stories. By definition, when I make reference to women being “in the midst of living their lives”, I mean Aboriginal women who have not yet reached community recognition as Elders. I mean women who are in the process of authoring, and living, the middle chapters of their unfolding life-stories, rather than the closing chapter. In addition, I understand the term “Aboriginal” to mean a person who has First Nations





heritage. I do not subscribe to a definition of “Aboriginal” based upon an individual’s exposure to, or familiarity with, First Nations culture.

For Aboriginal women, telling and documenting their more painful and confusing stories are important. Yet it seemed to me, from a therapeutic standpoint, that it would be of parallel importance to explore and understand what has been “authenticating” (White, 1997) of these women living by more desired identity stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It seemed just as therapeutically valuable to develop a sense of the process Aboriginal women seem engaged in as they attempt to create more coherent and meaningful identities. In sum, this narrative inquiry seemed well justified based upon the lack of literature speaking to how Aboriginal women, in the midst of their unfolding lives, have re-visioned and re-authored more empowering, self-accepting, and coherent versions of their self-stories, despite the confusing storylines they have so often been embedded within.

### The Research Question

This inviting gap in the literature gave way to the narrative inquiry question:

**“How have women of Aboriginal ancestry constructed a more coherent and desired sense of who they are, and who they want to become, in their stories of self?”**



The intent of this narrative inquiry was to explore the significant experiences that have shaped the identities or self-stories of three Aboriginal women, speaking from their positions within the middle of their adult lives. Once again, these three women are not yet Elders, they have lived many stories and have many more stories left to author and live. My focus of interest therefore lies in the process that these three women engaged in as they continually worked to re-construct and re-author sustaining identity-stories, in response to the challenging and confusing contexts they came up against. I wondered what their life-stories would illuminate, with regard to how each had managed to gradually “weave and mend” (Cameron, 1981) a more coherent tapestry or story of self, in spite of the discontinuities and challenges they experienced.

My methodological approach was that of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; 1994; 2000). This approach was most fitting since I aimed to develop an understanding of these women’s identity experiences, through an inquiry into the stories they lived and told about themselves. I chose this narrative approach with the understanding that I would be accessing information from both stories told and stories lived. There would be valuable meanings made through both the content of their stories as told, as well as through our jointly lived research process together. I therefore embraced narrative concepts of identity as the lens through which I attempted to understand these women’s identity processes, while utilizing narrative inquiry methodology as a means by which to gather the stories in a manner that invited me to remain open to the identity-related learning that unfolded through our shared research process.



## Reasons For This Inquiry

*There are Women everywhere with fragments  
gather fragments  
weave and mend*

*When we learn to come together we are whole ...  
we will know what we need to know  
to learn how to come together  
to learn how to weave and mend ...*

*(Cameron, 1981, p. 149)*

This narrative inquiry was pursued with the intent of documenting a beginning sense of the unique identity processes experienced by a population of women dually influenced by a rich cultural tradition and by a tradition of disconnection and marginalization. By gathering and reflecting upon a series of identity shaping experiences from early childhood (and prior) to middle adulthood, I hoped to illuminate a sense of the threads that seemed to interfere with, and more importantly facilitate, these women's identity processes. It was my contention that insights could be gleaned through the illuminating nature of these women's richly textured narratives of experience. I saw potential for these women's narratives of experience to stimulate unique resonations within readers. I felt there would be value in collaboratively re-telling Aboriginal women's stories, so to invite the kind of meaning-making that is individually productive and useful. My hope was for this narrative inquiry to stir resonations within readers so to facilitate a rippling out of





meaningful and personally relevant thought -- as we strive for through narrative modes of research.

Similarly, it was my desire that insights be offered through my collaborative narrative re-construction process with each woman's story. I viewed the process of engaging in this research journey as a rich opportunity to secure identity-related insights that could invite us as therapists to re-vision the ways we work with women of Aboriginal ancestry, and in doing so, invite a re-authoring of who it is we want to be in our therapeutic relationships with such women.

### Overview of the Text

This dissertation is organized in a chaptered format. However, I have veered from the usual dissertation structure by organizing my own narratives of experience, and each participant's narratives of experience, within separate chapters. I chose this format, as it seemed a respectful way to honor the considerable contribution of each narrative. This format also seemed to facilitate the representation of each narrative piece as a unique and significant work.

A review of pertinent literature follows this introductory discussion in Chapter Two. A discussion of narrative inquiry methodology and the methods employed in this study are explained in Chapter Three. The fourth chapter is a composition of my own narratives of experience, as related to the values, perspectives, and interest I carried with me into this study. The next three chapters, Chapters Five, Six, and



Seven, are the participants' narratives of experience shared and shaped collaboratively through our research conversations.

Finally, I reflect in Chapter Eight upon four main narrative threads that wove their way through each woman's individual experience, thus suggesting a beginning sense of the processes experienced by Aboriginal women working to authenticate a more coherent and desirable identity. Within this final chapter I discuss some implications for counselling and future research that resonated within me as I worked with these women's narratives of experience. My discussion is positioned from a place of emphasizing the therapeutic principles and practices that were more deeply reinforced within my own professional (and personal) self, as I worked with, and experienced, the stories within.



## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of this review of pertinent literature is to situate my question within the most scholarly, relevant, and influential pieces of literature supporting, guiding, and justifying this inquiry.

It occurred to me while turning back to the literature in order to write this piece, that my thought processes, language, use of metaphor, and overall approach to this research has been long in the making and shaping. Connections with people viewing identity through the narrative lens, whether through their writing, through conference conversations, or through quiet illuminating conversations held at the edge of their round office tables, have truly informed my reasons for pursuing this inquiry and for standing firmly within the small but growing body of thought focused on identity as the ongoing story or narrative we create, live, and re-create.

My experiences in graduate counseling courses at the University of Alberta first introduced me to, and ignited my interest in, the philosophy and practice of narrative therapy, especially the work of family therapist Michael White (1990; 1995; 1997). After years of reading his work and borrowing from his ideas in my clinical counseling practice, I was privileged to attend a two-day conference and listen in-person to White's empowering and respectful ways of practice. I was already hooked before I attended this engaging event. However hearing him describe and portray his ever-evolving ideas sent me home to my research with further transformative





concepts and language that I could use to articulate and justify the way I was working in my clinical and research practice.

Another equally influential voice has been that of Dr. Jean Clandinin's, professor and director of the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development, at the University of Alberta. Through my graduate work at the University of Alberta, I have been privileged to benefit from Dr. Clandinin's strong narrative philosophy and her ideas regarding narrative identity. Through conversations during my Master's thesis, Scenes of Togetherness: A Cree Elder's Philosophy of Health and Healing (1996), and again while working on this current inquiry, Dr. Clandinin's expertise and use of language in the development of narrative identity philosophy has shaped both my research process and product.

Learning gleaned through personal encounters and conversations with key people like Michael White and Dr. Jean Clandinin have been instrumental in situating and structuring this inquiry. I feel fortunate for having had face-to-face opportunities to hear these pioneers articulate their influential ideas as they push the growing edge of narrative identity philosophy even further.

I will now turn my focus to the scholarly literature that has guided this inquiry. My discussion will focus and unfold as follows:

- A. Narrative Concepts of Identity
- B. Aboriginal Womens' Experiences
- C. How and Why These Concepts and Experiences Informed This Research



Discussion of these concepts and experiences will serve to explain how this research was informed by these ideas and practices, why I intentionally worked from these philosophies, and why I viewed such an inquiry as valuable, as I went in search of a sense of: How Women of Aboriginal Ancestry Have Constructed a More Coherent and Desired Sense of Who They Are and Who They Want To Become In Their Stories of Self?

#### **A. Narrative Concepts of Identity**

Across the humanities disciplines, it has become apparent that various scholars are working from, and with, a narrative sense of identity. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have commented on this growing trend in their much-awaited book, Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research. As with other pioneers working on the narrative philosophy forefront, those working to hone a narrative perspective and language that fits their field's needs, are increasingly creating and making use of narrative knowledge bridges expanding across various disciplines such as anthropology, counseling psychology, teacher development and education, and qualitative research. This bridging of narrative philosophy across various disciplines speaks to the power and possibility of lives lived, researched, and understood to be like a story.

This doctoral research, albeit pursued from my field of counseling psychology, has been largely influenced by narrative knowledge bridges pioneered by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), writing from their research field of teacher education and development, and Michael White (1997), in Narratives of Therapists' Lives,



writing from the field of counseling psychology. However, in citing their own influences, these current day pioneers point to the work of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973; 1983; 1986; 1995) as having been one of the cross-discipline characters who played a significant role in their own theoretical and practical adaptations in their unique research and professional practices.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) mention having been influenced by Geertz's (1995) anthropological retrospective study. They have been shaped by Geertz's view of the inherent difficulties of attempting to research phenomenon undergoing constant change. More specifically, Clandinin and Connelly have borrowed from Geertz the assertion that anthropological research, or qualitative research more generally, is best to deal with the inherent reality of flux and change by basing tentative research knowing on rich, thickly-described narratives that tend to illuminate "the continuity and wholeness of an individual's life experience" (p. 17). This writing duo also cites Geertz as having informed their own justification for including their own researcher voices and stories within the richly described participant narratives. In this way narrative inquiry becomes an inquiry into the experiences or "storied moments of time and space" for both participants and researchers (p. 17).

Clandinin and Connelly's narrative philosophy has been shaped by various writers incorporating narrative into their work and, in turn, they have contributed significantly to literature in the areas of narrative inquiry (1986; 1990; 1994; 2000) and inquiry into narratives focusing on teacher education and development (1988; 1988; 1993; 1995; 1999).





In their (1990) article, Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly carefully clarify that narrative is a method of inquiry and phenomenon of inquiry. By teasing these ideas apart, they have enriched the philosophy of narrative concepts of identity while also offering practical ideas for narrative inquiry methodology. This doctoral research was carried out with narrative inquiry methodology, while the phenomenon of my inquiry were the stories of experience told by the women and co-constructed in the research texts with my own voice included. (Because my aim here is to illuminate the way in which my doctoral research was informed by narrative concepts of identity, I will leave the narrative methodology focus to the next chapter.)

Clandinin and Connelly (1990) work from a narrative concept of identity that views humans as, “storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p. 2). Inquiry into the storied experiences of participants brings about a simultaneous process of “living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories” (p. 4). This process holds true for both participant and researcher, that is, the collaborative nature of this inquiry method brings about a parallel process of telling and living stories for both parties. What is of crucial importance here is the understanding that as the life-stories lived and told by participant and researcher come together, “a shared narrative construction and reconstruction” takes place (1990, p. 5). In other words, by encountering each other’s stories of experience, both participant and researcher begin to tell and retell new stories, they construct an experience of some sort together and in doing so reconstruct the manner in which they live and tell their identity stories.



There are important assumptions attached to this concept of identity, as our individually and socially constructed and reconstructed story that we live by. Clandinin and Connelly's (1999) choice of title for their recent narrative inquiry, Shaping a Professional Identity: Stories of Educational Practice, brings the sense of these assumptions alive. Through their use of language they make apparent their assumptions associated with this narrative notion of identity as a self-story. One assumption made is that "people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives" (1990, p. 2). Also reflected through their language is the assumption that like a story, identity can be understood, shaped, retold and relived in an altered manner. This implied sense then means that like a story, identity is a continually changing narrative that is shaped through our own agency and through the changing landscapes within which we are embedded.

Let us now cross the discipline bridge to the field of counseling psychology where Australian family therapist, Michael White, has been equally dedicated to building upon this narrative concept of identity as he writes and practices from a narrative therapy perspective (1990; 1995; 1997). White is but one of a growing number of therapists working from the perspective that identity is the storied description we assign to our lives. White has played a significant role in pioneering initial narrative therapy thinking. However growing numbers of other scholars are joining with, and building upon, his ideas in ways that highlight the empowerment of therapy theory and practice centered on the ways in which we tell, live, construct, and reconstruct our self-stories (Eron & Lund, 1996; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Monk,



Winslade, Crocket, & Epston, 1997; Pare, 1997; Parry & Doan, 1994; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1994).

White's overriding belief is that people who have experienced oppressive cultural practices often develop "problem-saturated descriptions" or stories about their sense of self (1995, p. 463). That is, he views people's difficulties as connected to the stories they tell about themselves. White's narrative therapy assists people to "locate, generate, or resurrect alternative stories" that provide people with an alternative frame through which to view themselves and their relationship with the problems that attempt to live them (1997, p. 16).

In a simplified way, White's narrative approach to therapy then becomes a process of 1) first listening to client stories in order to better understand the problematic meanings an individual attributes to the shaping of their sense of self and 2) to then engage in collaborative conversations that invite a deconstruction of outlived self-stories and a focus on the "unique outcomes" or times when personal agency overtook the problem, thus creating a dialogue or co-constructed self-story whereby the client is empowered over problems. This collaborative storytelling process leads to the re-construction or re-authoring of more "preferred" self-stories that clients can live and tell about themselves (1997).

For White, as client and therapist collaborate together towards deconstructing and reconstructing a client's preferred self-story, it is important to activate some narrative therapy practices so to enhance the likelihood of the new story remaining alive and well. Like Clandinin and Connelly, White in his 1997 book, Narratives of Therapists' Lives, explains that his influence and usage of therapeutic language



practices are heavily derived from the work of anthropologists Clifford Geertz (1973) and Barbara Myerhoff (1982).

From the work of these anthropologists White has borrowed their creation and usage of ethnographic ideas such as “re-membering” (Myerhoff, 1982) and “thick description” as opposed to “thin description” (Geertz, 1973) to shape and inform his theory and practice. These reformulated ideas practiced through White’s (1997) narrative therapy lens offers a therapeutic process that White refers to as “authentication”, which is essentially about substituting disqualifying and oppressive experiences and knowledges “for the diverse, historical and local associations of persons’ lives” (p. 13).

A brief discussion of White’s (1997) reformulation of the anthropological notions of “re-membering” and “thick description” follow since these notions have been utilized in my current inquiry as linguistic means by which to communicate a narrative sense of how the women I collaborated with created and authenticated their own preferred self-stories.

“Re-membering practices” are described by White (1997) as practices or actions that help people:

*Reclaim and privilege the significant historical and local associations of their lives, and to explore possibilities in the incorporation of yet other persons into their lives .... Re-membering practices are a source of ongoing sustenance to us ... re-membering is not simply recollection, but a practice that actually contributes to the identification and acknowledgement of those persons who have contributed significantly to the generation of our stories of identity and to our knowledges and skills of living (p. 3-4, 8).*





White emphasized that we need to sustain our identity or story of self by qualifying and “authenticating” this sense of self through “more local discourses”, that is by re-membering or resurrecting the empowering knowledge that is “generated in the immediate contexts and intimate communities of a person’s daily life” (p. 11). In other words, recalling and knowing our “local” stories and the characters and scenes within such stories, embody an empowering and strengthening richness that can serve to inform and shape a preferred version of self-story. “Local” stories in this sense could mean family stories, relationship stories, childhood stories, profession stories, and ancestral stories.

“Re-membering practices” result in more than “the authentication of a person’s knowledgeableness”, through this process White asserts that “people can achieve a ‘full’ or ‘thick’ description of these knowledges, and of their personal identities” (p. 14):

*The outcome of this is the production of lives that are multiply contextualized. It is the multiple contextualization of life that contributes to the generation of narrative resources, and thus to lives that might be well read to quote Geertz: Texts require multiple contextualizations in order to be well read (1983, p. 176-177).*

*These narrative resources contribute significantly to the range of possible meanings that persons might give to their experiences of the world, and to the range of option for action in the world. And, in that this range of options for action would not be available to persons whose lives are poorly read, these narrative resources are constitutive of life – they contribute to the shaping of life; they make life up (1997, p. 16-17).*

Through this narrative therapy lens then, by recalling one’s “local” (family, ancestral, childhood, relationship etc.) stories, opportunities and narrative resources are re-membered and created thus producing a richer and more meaningfully array of



possibilities for telling and living a desired identity story. Echoing through White's narrative view of identity are the same assumptions held by Clandinin and Connelly in their work.

I turn now to another work that has been influential to my current thinking. David Carr's, Time, Narrative, and History (1986), further informed my understanding of why our narrative identity process is so vital and how this self-authoring process is really about continually striving to compose "narrative coherence" amongst the wealth of experiences we live:

*Making sense of events in one's life, one's life-story, is about coherence (p. 87) ... narrative coherence is what we find or effect in much of our experience and action, and to the extent that we do not, we aim for it, try to produce it, and try to restore it when it goes missing for whatever reason (p. 90) ... Coherence seems to be a need imposed on us whether we seek it or not. Things need to make sense. We feel a lack of sense when it goes missing. Unity of self, not as an underlying identity but as a life that hangs together, is not a pre-given condition but an achievement. Some of us succeed, it seems, better than others. None of us succeeds totally. We keep at it (p. 97).*

This lifelong endeavor is about making sense of the events that have occurred in our history, are currently occurring in our present, and are hoped to occur in our future. This organizing and meaning-making process, as Carr (1986) explained, is facilitated through "telling and retelling, to ourselves and to others, the story of what we are about and what we are" (p. 97). This need we have to author, and re-author, an identity through this coherence-making process adds to the justification proposed by Clandinin and Connelly (1999) and White (1997) for remembering, resurrecting, telling and retelling richly descriptive self-stories that open up possibilities for re-shaping and authenticating a more desired identity.



These parallel narrative philosophies, when integrated and applied to the topic of my current inquiry with Aboriginal women, justify the importance 1) of obtaining richly-detailed thick descriptions of lives as lived and 2) for attempting to understand the way historically, and often experientially, marginalized, “incoherenced” (Carr, 1987), and “thinly-described” (White, 1997) womens’ lives have been authored and re-authored as they strive for desired identity stories. By collaborating with these women in a process that invites them to tell about their lived experiences, by nature of these narrative philosophies, I will be audience to their retelling and reliving of the way they experienced their process, while also actively collaborating in a reconstruction or re-authoring of their meaning and stories of self through the research process. After all, as the referenced scholars have noted, every experience shapes and reshapes one’s unfolding identity story.

There have been two examples of narratively-based works that warrant standing on their own in this review of pertinent literature. These are Carolyn Heilbrun’s, Writing A Women’s Life (1988) and Mary Catherine Bateson’s, Composing A Life (1989). As suggested by their titles, these feminist writers have offered narrative works that bring to text rich examples of how women, historically and more contemporarily, have constructed and reconstructed their identity stories.

Heilbrun’s (1988) work is centered on the way in which women have historically, and to some degree contemporarily, been limited in their choice of scripts or stories they come to fashion their lives after. Heilbrun begins her discussion by considering the constraining and narrow literary options women have been able to read and borrow from as alternative stories from which to inform more empowered



and satisfying identity plotlines. She then turns her feminist discussion towards the self-story altering role of rightfully acknowledging and expressing anger, taking back power and control, acting on “awakenings”, and remaining conscious of one’s possibilities (p. 118):

*The woman who writes herself a life beyond convention, or the woman whose biographer perceives her as living beyond conventional expectations, has usually early recognized in herself a special gift without name or definition .... And by ‘gifted’ I mean not only talented but with a sense of great possibilities, great desires (p. 96-97).*

For Heilbrun (1988), these elements are what free women in writing more empowering and desirable scripts to live by. For this doctoral inquiry, I too viewed these elements, and lived experiences, as the script material that seemed to lead women away from the starvation of old oppressive stories, toward the construction of more empowered, meaningful, and consciously-shaped self-stories.

From Bateson I have connected with her book-titled sense of identity and life “as a work in progress” (1989). In her richly described, Composing A Life, she works with similar narrative identity notions echoed by scholars referenced earlier. Bateson, however, represents these notions as she studies and writes about five womens’ lives and the “improvisational” process they engage in as they work to shape more satisfying and fitting identity stories (p. 10). Bateson’s work is important for me because she beautifully illuminates the empowerment and identity shaping wisdom that can, and should, be gleaned from the multiple complexities and challenges inherent in the multi-faceted female experience. For Bateson, there is





infinite re-shaping potential in even the most confusing of life circumstances. This is what allows one to continually compose and re-author a desired sense of self.

This framework, built upon the notion that lives are rich with improvisational re-authoring potential, is the same lens that I will use to approach, understand, and write about the lives of women of Aboriginal ancestry as they work toward creating meaningful self-stories from the non-sensical and constraining stories they have so often initially inhabited.

## **B. Aboriginal Women's Experiences**

*We are lived by the stories of our race and place ... (Mair, 1988, p. 127)*

Women of Aboriginal ancestry have a growing body of documentation that speaks out about a historical legacy of painful loss, separation, abuse, and identity confusion. For these women, the process of making sense of who they are, and who they want to become, has more often than not been a process fraught with ravaging incoherence and non-sensical realities. Aboriginal writer, Paula Gunn Allen (1989), spoke of the pain of living this experience when she stated, "If Indians as a group are invisible ... then Indian women are non-existent" (p. 9).

Women of Aboriginal ancestry have often inherited, and inhabited, confusing stories of experience that they have then been left to make and construct sense from. Gunn Allen (1989) noted that literature by these women, and about these women, has finally started to surface in the last couple decades, as their voices have been granted



a place in the publishing world, thus allowing them to speak out about the abusive and oppressive nature of their lives.

More specifically, as a review of the literature was carried out for this research, I sorted through pain infused themes related to: sexual/physical/emotional abuse (Perreault & Vance, 1990; Wiebe & Johnson, 1998; York, 1989); loss/separation/grief (Archibald, 1992; Kimelman, 1985) identity confusion (Billson, 1995; Bruchac, 1993; Hernandez, 1993; LaRocque, 1990; Hilden, 1995); disempowering legal Acts (Bartlett, 1988; Jamieson, 1978; Robson, 1989) residential schooling and discrimination (Johnston, 1989; Lane Deer & Erdoes, 1972; Riley, 1993; Wood, 1996), and a historical voicelessness in published literature (Gunn Allen, 1989; LaRocque, 1990; Perreault & Vance, 1990).

It was apparent that very “problem-saturated” identity stories, true to the abusive contexts they were born out of, existed there in the literature (White, 1997). Stories were prevalent that focused on the oppressive themes that historically interfered with these women creating satisfying self-stories. But what about these womens' stories of empowerment, healing, satisfaction, and success? I became curious about what seemed equally important, yet strangely missing.

There appeared to be an inviting gap in the literature about these women – a gap that forced me to ask how Aboriginal women were rewriting these sorts of confusing scripts and living by more empowered self-stories. After all, I knew these sorts of empowering female plotlines were being lived. I saw them around me. I heard them around me. But my search of the literature had not produced much in the



way of Aboriginal womens' stories of transformation and becoming, approached and written from a richly-described narrative stance.

Sure I had read, and even written about, the self-stories of recognizable and acclaimed Elders but these Elders spoke from the closing chapter of their life-stories, their stories were told and understood from many wisdom imbued years of hindsight (Cruikshank, 1990; Meili, 1991; Wood, 1996). I, on the other hand, was yet to read about the process or experiences that had shaped everyday Aboriginal women in the midst of authoring and authenticating desired plotlines to live their lives by. It became apparent that very little literature existed that focused on stories reflective of how Aboriginal women continually worked to triumph over the oppressive storylines within which they were so often embedded.

### **C. How and Why These Concepts and Experiences Informed This Research**

As I immersed myself in my current inquiry, it was my contention that by approaching Aboriginal women from a narrative philosophical stance, and by engaging with these women in collaborative conversations born out of this stance, that valuable information would be gleaned. I felt knowledge secured through such an inquiry would be meaningful for clinicians, researchers, and for the participants themselves.

A curious absence seemed to exist in the literature that could speak to and illuminate how typical Aboriginal women have come to live by their own preferred identity stories. As a counseling psychologist working with women of Aboriginal ancestry, gathering an understanding of this unique process through their richly



described experiences, seemed a very important and necessary addition to what seemed a growing body of documentation centered on a legacy of abuse and oppression.

This confirmed my decision to study the narratives of women in the midst of their own ongoing identity shaping process. I consciously decided to work with Aboriginal women who have struggled, and do struggle, with the complexities of situations and stories being lived, within them, and in the contexts around them. By angling my research in this manner, I hoped to gain a professional and personal sense of the experiences, and subsequent meanings, attached to their sense-making identity processes.

I felt certain an inquiry of this sort would serve to shape and inform my own sense of who I would prefer to become, as a clinician and researcher, working with the complex stories experienced by women who desire an alternative storyline. That is, I felt certain that theoretical and practical ideas would be gleaned that I could, in turn, use to shape, inform, and thicken my own preferred way of working therapeutically with such difficult and confusing life-stories. I also believed that by documenting my collaborative experiences with these women, I could offer rich and illuminating narratives that might be inspiring of new insights and ways of working for other therapists who work with marginalized women.

Ultimately, I trusted that the process and product of this inquiry would enhance and inform the way we as clinicians and researchers approach Aboriginal women's stories of experience -- and perhaps in doing so, invite a gentle re-shaping





of our own clinical and research notions regarding who we are, and who we strive to be, as therapists and researchers working with such historically challenged women.



## CHAPTER THREE

### HOW NARRATIVE INQUIRY METHODOLOGY INFORMED MY RESEARCH PRACTICE

A discussion of narrative as phenomenon was offered in the literature review section; I now turn my focus to narrative as a method for approaching research. My discussion will highlight narrative inquiry theory and practical implications as related to my research into Aboriginal women's identity-shaping experiences. This discussion will explain why and how I engaged in the process of collecting narrative data, analyzing the narratives, and writing narratives of experience. I then discuss why narrative inquiry was my methodology of choice. Next, I speak to the issue of judging the legitimacy and utility of my research. I then give a sense of how I came to know and select the three women who shared their narratives for this inquiry. Finally, I complete this methodology section by offering a closing comment on the ethical issues I needed to consider as I carried out my narrative inquiry with women of Aboriginal ancestry.

#### A. Narrative Inquiry Methodology As Related To My Research

Clandinin and Connelly's growing body of work on narrative inquiry as a research approach, has been instructional in educating me throughout the process of collecting stories of experience, analyzing them, and writing the final research text (1986; 1990; 1994; 2000). In their recent text, Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research (2000), these writers attempt to illustrate a definition of



narrative inquiry by “showing” more than by “telling” (p. 20). However, they do sum up their first chapter by offering “a working concept” of the assumptions and characteristics inherent to narrative inquiry:

*Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interactions with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives, both individual and social. Simply stated ... narrative inquiry is stories lived and told (p. 20).*

This theoretical definition of narrative inquiry clearly rests upon a foundation of working with narratively-constructed meanings born out of lived experience, telling of lived experience, and reliving lived experience through the retelling (or reading) of lived experience. By “reading of lived experience”, I am referring to the meaning-making re-construction process that inevitably occurs for the inquiry participants as they read the “narratives of experience” I organize, interpret, write and present in this dissertation, based upon the stories they have told me. Narrative inquiry research methodology therefore flows from this narrative meaning-making sense. This theory informs practice. Specific theoretical implications inform and guide narrative inquiry practice.

I turn now to the practice of narrative inquiry methodology, as specific methods related to my research, so to illuminate why these practices held both importance and necessity during my collection of narratives, analysis of narratives, and while writing the final research text.



## Collection of the Narratives

Many issues needed to be thoughtfully considered and respected during my entry phase of this research. First, in keeping with Clandinin and Connelly's (1990) narrative philosophy that our identity is an ever-changing story we live and tell, individually and socially, it was necessary that I reflect, acknowledge, and make apparent my own background story. A research journal was used to facilitate and track my ongoing reflection process. By doing so I was better able to track my own re-shaping process as my researcher self-story intermingled with those stories told and lived by the participants. In addition, within my final research text I added my own narratives of experience and situated this piece on its own in Chapter Four. Readers can then interpret for themselves how my personal, educational, professional, and former research experiences have shaped my current interest and purpose. My own stories are presented so to illuminate the lived stories that I write from as I make sense of the participant's narratives of experience.

Another issue I needed to negotiate throughout the data collection phase was that of nurturing collaborative research relationships with the women who participated in this inquiry. Those well versed in narrative inquiry have emphasized that the quality of these often precarious relationships directly affects the quality of field texts or data entrusted to the researcher:

*Researcher relationships are central to the creation of field texts ... [these relationships] shape the nature of field texts and establish the epistemological status of them [in that] a relationship embeds meaning in the text and imposes form on the research texts ultimately developed ... what is told, as well as the meaning of what is told, is shaped by the relationship (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 419).*





This made sense to me as a researcher and therapist. I acknowledged the crossover similarities between both roles, and was cognizant of how I was the most influential instrument affecting the shape of my research. That is, although this was not therapy, I recognized that I was encouraging my participants to share in the kind of personal dialogue that necessitated me fostering a safe and therapeutic stance with each participant. With this in the forefront of my mind, I took responsibility for developing a flexible, empathic, and respectful relationship with each woman.

My efforts to develop a collaborative, respectful, and egalitarian working relationship involved: ensuring informed consent with regard to ethical issues and time involvements; organizing and accommodating research conversations around their busy schedules; communicating my appreciation verbally and through small gestures like flowers, plants, and cards; providing copies of field transcripts for their review and confirmation of what had been said; keeping them informed of my progress during the writing phase; and providing written research texts for feedback and validation.

Despite my best efforts, something happened that warrants mentioning. In hindsight, I realize I took it for granted that a consistent and collaborative working relationship would take hold. I felt accepted and trusted by each woman. However, it was not long before I found myself experiencing confusion and disappointment over missed or “forgotten” research appointments.

I began to notice a pattern within my process with each woman. The first couple of data collection conversations began with what I perceived as willing enthusiasm on their part. By the third or fourth meetings, with a couple of the



women, I sensed a discomfort that surfaced through quiet silences. Coupled with the “forgotten” appointments, I addressed this issue. Did they wish to withdraw from the research process? Could they help me understand what was happening for them?

We talked -- about my research topic and the process that was happening for each of them. They helped me understand. In my focus on what meaning their stories carried for them and for me, I had unintentionally lost sight of how challenging the in-the-moment processing was for them. In their own unique ways, each woman spoke about how our immediate research process had, for the first time ever, challenged them to look at how they had developed into the people sitting before me and my somewhat intimidating tape-recorder. This was far from easy work! These women were sharing of their vulnerabilities, their heart-wrenching pains, and moments of emotion-charged victories -- and in the midst of telling and reliving these experiences, they were also engaged in the very intimate, and immediate, process of trying to make sense of how these experiences shaped who they came to be. Recognizing and validating this multi-layered process was necessary. I embraced this understanding with the help of my storytellers. I thank them for their patience and commitment.

Tape-recorded stories told by each woman made up my field texts, and eventually shaped and supported my final research document. Identity-shaping stories, as my narrative phenomenon, provided richly detailed and described accounts of experience. I was after a holistic sense of the complexities of each woman’s unique life as lived; gathering narratives from across their life-stories seemed to best meet this need. In achieving this end, a collaborative-conversational approach was



utilized (Anderson, 1992; Cruikshank, 1990). From a therapeutic perspective, this collaborative-conversational approach is employed as a “way to hold empathetic conversations out of which emerge new meanings” (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995, p. 452). Family therapist Harlene Anderson (1993) described this approach as a way for the therapist (or researcher) to be “in language” with the client or research participant in a manner “that is less hierarchical, more egalitarian, mutual, respectful, and human, a [conversational stance] that allows a therapist [or researcher] to be aware of the depth, existence, and experiences of the individual” (p. 343).

With this approach guiding me, I began the series of conversations by presenting each woman with the type-written question: “Looking back over your life, what stories would you tell in order to explain your sense of who you are?” Each time we met I referred back to this initial question and together we would continue the process of fleshing out experiences and stories, that stretched across their lifetimes, and that they sensed as identity-shaping.

My narrative therapy training flowed through our process, as I utilized a stance of curiosity and questioning, around narrative threads reflective of problematic experiences overcome (Anderson, 1993; Nichols & Schwartz, 1995; White & Epston, 1990). I consciously tried not to censor or direct their tellings. However, I did tend to gently shape some of the process by posing questions from a stance of curiosity and tentativeness. By conversing this way, I invited each woman to story-tell around how she did indeed create a life informed by a more empowered, coherent, or accepting sense of self, despite the complexities each was forced to make sense of within their lives. This tentative stance allowed me to gently check out my growing





understandings while encouraging each woman to refine and substantiate their perceptions and supporting narratives of identity.

I deepened our conversational process by asking the participants if they would share and speak to any mementos, or even take me to a certain meaningful place, in order to stir memories and thicken their storytelling. I borrowed this valuable approach, from Clandinin and Connelly (2000), who justified the importance of this method, by explaining that such items or places “mark a special memory in our time, a memory around which we construct stories” (p. 114).

Why three? I have been asked why I chose to work with three women. Yes, I could have worked with more than three. However, I felt I would have a substantial amount of field text by attempting to present a narrative sense of three complex unfolding lives. I feared by working with more than three women, the detailed richness that illuminated the complexities of each woman’s life, might become lost to the potential dilemma of shearing down individual stories to make other participant stories fit within the document. A problem such as this would have interfered with me offering the kind of interpretive text I wanted. A problem such as this would have also conflicted with my sense of responsibility toward the participants, in that I placed great weight upon my obligation to present their identity processes vividly and holistically. As I now stand, from the final writing stage, I am affirmed in my decision to stay with three. As it was, I feel I have met my purpose, and foregone the undesirable option of presenting lived lives within constraining length limits.

The research conversations occurred during the summer months of 1998. I began by working first with Dina\* (a pseudonym). While nearing completion with



Dina, I began to work with Mrs. Audrey Poitras. Just before the close of my collection phase with Audrey, I began to meet with Amy\* (a pseudonym). The order in that I worked with them, and the length of each meeting, was dictated by the participants' schedules and availability. Most conversations were between one to three hours in length. I tape-recorded six research conversations with Dina, five with Audrey, and four with Amy. Typed transcriptions were made from each conversation and a copy forwarded to the participant in order to confirm what had been said and to again access their permission to use the transcribed conversations towards the research text.

### Analysis of the Narratives

In narrative inquiry the process of analyzing the narratives begins during the very first research conversation and carries through even the final stages of writing the text, and beyond. The interpretive nature of this research design therefore necessitates a lengthy commitment to reflexivity, a direct reliance on the narratives to speak of and illuminate narrative threads, and a collaborative checking and feedback process with participants and those knowledgeable in the area of study. Yet again, the interpretive meaning making nature of narrative inquiry has implications that inform these practices.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) emphasized this issue within a chapter in their narrative inquiry text entitled, "Composing Field Texts" (p. 92). Within this chapter these narrative inquirers speak to how transcribed participant-researcher conversations make up only one dimension of the narrative inquiry experiential data.



Of equal importance, for the researcher, is documenting his/her own ongoing inner experiential account. So in addition to the word-for-word transcriptions, a narrative inquirer must use some form, or forms, to document his/her own experiential and meaning-making process. This is of crucial importance so as to facilitate the “careful positioning of field texts to the final integrity of the work” (p. 93). In other words, by documenting my experience and integrating this documentation into the final research text, I offer readers an explicit positional context from which they can better sense my interpretive influence within the work. This serves to support and enhance the interpretive meanings I offer in my final research text (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

I made use of various documentation formats in documenting my unfolding experience through the ongoing meaning-making process. These formats included: tape-recorded reflections immediately upon leaving research conversations; reflexive journal entries; thoughts bracketed within transcripts while typing the transcripts; reflexive notes-to-self jotted in the transcript margins while reading and re-reading the transcripts; yellow sticky notes scribbled frantically during moments of insight then posted on ever-shrinking wall and computer space; and numerous reflexive idea-sketches of outlines configured, re-configured, and re-configured yet again as new thoughts and interpretive connections continued to emerge.

The process of narrative analysis seems to be guided by the overriding questions: What could all these documentations of experience mean about the phenomenon studied? What of significance lends proof to these meanings? Or, in terms of my particular study, what is illuminated through the women’s narratives of experience, that is supportive or suggestive of the meanings I have constructed? Can



I find narrative ‘evidence’ within the narratives of experience to justify, explain, and make plausible my own meaning-making process?

Narrative analysis therefore rests on interpretations gleaned and supported through the richly detailed field texts and reflexive documents (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). With these broad questions guiding this process, the inquirer scours the field texts, attempting to “code” and distill significance from the richly detailed texts (p. 131). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described this complex “coding” process as one in which the inquirer sifts through field text in search of “... names of characters..., places where actions and events occurred, story lines that interweave and interconnect, gaps or silences that become apparent, tensions that emerge, and continuities and discontinuities that appear” (p. 131). These “codes” essentially give way to the narrative threads that shape and inform the writing of the final research text. These interpretive “codes” are then infused with deeper meanings, altered meanings, and ultimately re-visioned and co-constructed meanings, as field text patterns and “codes” are shared with participants and committee members, who read such texts through their own unique positions and storied experiences (Clandinin & Connelly).

I worked through this interpretive narrative analysis process in a similar fashion with my inquiry. The countless hours of reading, re-reading, and re-reading again, of my field texts and reflexive documentation, eventually gave way to the surfacing of narrative threads or patterns. More specifically, my analysis of each woman’s unique story seemed to illuminate a plotline characterized by early gaps, silences, and discontinuities, which eventually gave way to an increasing momentum







of continuity and integrated experience. As I moved back and forth between the women's stories, my eyes began to see narrative threads, or plotline commonalities, that invited me deeper into the meaning-making process.

I began to see evidence, within each woman's unfolding life-story, that suggested each had worked through an identity process that could be plotted around being forced to sort through some remarkably similar dilemmas and challenges. Also demonstrated was evidence of plotline commonalities in terms of the kinds of experiences and attitudes that seemed to sustain and enrich these women's identities, for example waking to the importance of, and transitioning into, a self-initiated exploration and re-connection with their familial ancestry and cultural traditions. I thought about these plotline commonalities as narrative threads, because these commonalities wove themselves through each woman's narratives of experience.

This notion of weaving began to shape my thinking. I came to see that these women's experiences were often about taking somewhat similar steps in response to the loose, frayed, and incoherent strands that interfered with their living their lives the way they wanted. While each woman was responsible for situation-specific strands of sense-making, they did seem to metaphorically share some common processes in terms of what they chose to do about these confusing threads during specific phases of their lives. I therefore think about these women as having essentially created more satisfying identities through a process that can be likened to pulling, weaving, and essentially mending together multiple loose, silenced, and discontinuous threads that characterized each of their unique experiences.



When individual plotlines, and across-stories plotlines, were found to be well supported in the field text, I would take my growing understandings and their narrative evidence back to the participants for their impressions and responses. Together we would converse about the notions I was deriving from my experiences with them. Ultimately we would converse collaboratively in a process of shaping, reshaping, and essentially refining the impressions I had based upon their stories. When the process of checking out my interpretive impressions with the participants felt certain enough to proceed, the writing of the research document then began. During this phase I also consulted with committee members Drs. Jean Clandinin and Peggy Wilson to benefit from their perspectives with regard to the analysis.

### Writing the Narrative Research Text

Again I turned to Clandinin and Connelly's narrative inquiry work in order to inform and remind me of necessary considerations for writing a good narrative inquiry text (1990; 2000). From their 1990 article, Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry, these writers emphasized that criteria for judging a good narrative inquiry is "beyond reliability, validity, and generalizability" (p. 7). They go on to explain that, "narrative inquiry [is] driven by a sense of the whole and it is this sense which needs to drive the writing (and reading) of narrative" (p. 7). The intent in a narrative research text is to offer my reading audience enough experiential detail, balanced with a sense of the whole, in order to make both available and apparent the meanings I constructed through the research process (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). That is, my research text ought to convey a sense of how I came to the interpretive



meanings that I did. I see myself having worked toward this end by making use of three narrative inquiry elements.

First, in attempting to make available and apparent my narrative meaning-making, I worked with what Clandinin and Connelly (1990) refer to as “multiple I’s” (p. 9):

*One of our tasks in writing narrative accounts is to convey a sense of the complexity of all of the “I’s” ... We are, in narrative inquiry, constructing narratives at several levels. At one level it is the personal narratives and the jointly shared and constructed narratives that are told in the research writing, but narrative researchers are compelled to move beyond that telling of the lived story to tell the research story (p. 10).*

In keeping with this written narrative element, I constructed my interpretations and explanations largely based upon field texts and reflexive writing, and then illuminated my understandings in the final document through the voices of my storytelling participants, through my voice woven into the collaborative re-telling and re-voicing of their stories, and through my researcher voice as I spoke from my meaning-making researcher stance (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These multiple voices are integrated throughout the dissertation text.

By example, here is an excerpt from my work with participant Audrey that has evidence of all three types of these voices, mentioned above:

*I reflected upon how I felt when I didn’t have a father so it was like, “Now I need someone else. I need somebody else to have, to be mine kind of”* (Audrey’s voice, from p. 38 of transcript).

*I asked Audrey if she thought her concern that she might eventually, “have nobody while everybody has somebody”, was connected to her earlier feeling that “something was missing” from her sense of self?* (Racquel’s questioning voice, from p. 38 of transcript).



*Audrey's words touched a chord in me and I felt compelled to explore this ... Her response seemed to verify that she, in hindsight, did in fact engage in a process that involved consciously and purposely creating a desired envisioned future based upon disappointing experiences and feelings from her past (Racquel's voice, from p. 141 of research text).*

Use of the narrative organizing elements of plot (timelines) and scene (contexts) were also used to ensure the experiential quality of each participant's story, and in doing so facilitated a further expression of my meaning-making process. More specifically, each participant's story is retold around a past-present-future timeline, and contextualized historically and socially, in an attempt to make apparent how the narratives have influenced my understanding of how these women have constructed their more coherent and desired stories of self.

Metaphors made their way into our research conversations and were, therefore, influential in shaping the final form of the written research text. Each metaphor was co-constructed as my research process with each participant unfolded. I did not have any preconceived notions around what would surface through our meetings. The metaphors evolved as words or images came forward in their storytelling, which I then picked up on and utilized in my questions. Thus we came to gradually flesh out personally meaningful metaphors that seemed to convey a sense of their own unique identity process.

The use of metaphor assisted initially as a linguistic image we could use as we collaborated together in trying to understand their individual identity processes. A pioneer, visionary, and learner-teacher metaphor were developed. The appropriateness of each metaphor was repeatedly checked with each participant throughout our research conversations and again during the writing and response





process. The metaphor seemed to be a powerful mode through which to communicate about and re-story the identity processes. I therefore wrote around each metaphor, as I wanted to carry this sense of effectiveness into the re-telling of the identity-stories, so to again demonstrate and highlight the adequacy and plausibility of my understandings with regard to narrative identity and more directly, Aboriginal women's identity processes.

## **B. Why Narrative Inquiry ?**

Justification for my decision to use narrative inquiry methodology lay in both personal and topic related reasons.

On a most basic personal level, narrative inquiry philosophy and practice fits with, and reflects back, who I am and how I view the world. Both personally and professionally I make sense of my world through a narrative lens. It is my worldview. This worldview shaped and guided me throughout my life; as an imaginative child who read to experience other possibilities, as an English teacher who told and invited stories to ignite imaginative possibilities, and as a therapist who assists clients in the imaginative re-authoring of possibilities. I make sense of the world around me, and me in the world, through stories. I make sense of identity as an unfolding storyline ripe with possibilities and narrative implications. It is natural then, that I view and approach research phenomena and processes through this lens.

Narrative inquiry methodology is a best fit for investigating narrative identity processes, as related to the experiences of women of Aboriginal ancestry, for several reasons. First, this methodology fits my attempt to understand and illuminate the



unfolding wholeness of women's experiences throughout life, and since this is what narrative inquiry aims to capture in the phenomenon studied, my own methodology need was met. A second justification is found in the fit this methodology has with Aboriginal women, in that there is great cultural value placed upon the function of knowing and being able to tell of the stories that inform one's legacy of identity. It seemed appropriate then that in attempting to understand their identity processes, a narrative storytelling methodology would be most suitable and culturally appropriate. A third justification for the narrative approach can be understood by considering that this methodology flows forth from a larger body of social science literature that has developed and embraced the worldview that identity is our self-narrative we live and tell (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Freedman, 1993; Parry & Doan, 1994). Therefore, narrative as an identity process, or phenomenon studied, could only be carried out with a methodology informed by, and embedded within, this across discipline worldview.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated "we do not think it is very helpful to ... sort and place theoretical methods beside one another" (p. 128). They go on to support this position with:

*It is of no great significance for narrative inquiry because ... the place of theory in narrative inquiry differs from the place of theory in formalistic inquiries ... formalists begin inquiry in theory, whereas narrative inquirers tend to begin with experience as lived and told in stories (p. 128).*

The entire foundation upon which narrative inquiry is built and practiced from is unique. No other qualitative methodology, such as phenomenology, grounded theory, or ethnography, would have facilitated the experiential unfolding of a lifetime



of stories. No other qualitative methodology would have facilitated a rich collection of the successful and uniquely satisfying stories experienced by Aboriginal women, still quietly silent within the literature. No other methodology would have facilitated my understanding of how these womens' identities were narratively constructed.

### C. What Makes This A Good Narrative Inquiry?

Language is currently being developed to facilitate ways to dialogue about the elements that make for a good narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990, 2000; Conle, 1996; Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Van Maanen, 1988). Several ideas for possible criteria are being discussed in the literature. However, narrative inquirers are being encouraged to choose, and even invent, criteria concepts and language that best fits with the essence of their own unique inquiries. As Clandinin and Connelly (1990) urged:

*Like other qualitative methods, narrative inquiry relies on criteria other than validity, reliability, and generalizability. It is important not to squeeze the language of narrative criteria into a language created for other forms of research. The language and criteria for the conduct of narrative inquiry are under development in the research community ... It is currently the case that each inquirer must search for, and defend, the criteria that best apply to his or her work (p. 7).*

It was apparent that Guba and Lincoln's naturalistic terminology (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability) were not the most fitting criterion from which to discuss the value of my narrative inquiry. I therefore consulted with Dr. Jean Clandinin regarding this issue. I approached her with several of the criterion terms used in the literature to consider narrative inquiry's legitimacy, such as



“transferability” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), “apparency”, and “verisimilitude” (Van Maanen, 1988). I was also familiar with the way Clandinin and Connelly (2000) emphasized a good narrative inquiry “as having an explanatory, invitational quality ... authenticity ... adequacy and plausibility” (p. 185). In addition, Jean introduced me to Conle’s (1996) notion of “resonance” as a valuable process and utility related to good narrative research.

With these understandings, I concluded that my wish with regard to questions of goodness and legitimacy, would be that the value of my narrative inquiry be judged based upon the invitational and resonating quality I see it embodying (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Conle, 1996). More specifically, I view the utility of my research as an experiential text that richly illuminates the narrative identity process that Michael White (1997) referred to as “authentication”. By coming into this “authentication” process as a reader of richly described, yet likely personally foreign experiences, counseling psychologists are invited to engage in a valuable “resonance” process (Conle, 1996), by conjuring up their own personal memories and experiences that ultimately connect readers with the narratives of experience and deepens a reader’s sense of understanding with regard to the foreign experiences of such women. The gap separating the reader’s experience from the possible experiences of Aboriginal women then narrows. Through each reader’s idiosyncratic resonating process, valuable understandings and meanings are inevitably re-shaped and, in turn, these re-shaped meanings inform their way into our professional therapeutic practice with marginalized women.







To quote from Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner (1998), education-based narrative inquirers:

*It is well to recognize that personal experiences among humans differ and that these differences need not be seen as epistemological liabilities but as rich sources from which we can learn to experience qualities of the world that we might not otherwise encounter. The utility, validity, or reliability of a writer's portrayal of a social scene is not to be appraised by the extent to which others writing independently about the same scene produce an identical portrayal, but rather whether the portrayal created by different individuals help us see things we hadn't noticed before ...*

*Our test of the utility of [narrative inquiry] is whether the portrait narrative ...portrays qualities that advance our understanding or enables us to act in more effective ways. Productive idiosyncrasy more than replicability or mimesis is the higher good (p. 38-39).*

#### **D. Inviting Participation: How I Met and Chose The Women**

On an evening a few years ago, as I was mulling over a direction for my doctoral research, I attended a very special birthday celebration. This celebration was in honor of Cree Elder, Dr. Anne Anderson's 91<sup>st</sup> birthday. Anne was a cherished family friend, and was kind enough to share her stories with me for my master of education thesis, Scenes of Togetherness: A Cree Elders Philosophy of Health and Healing (1996).

That evening I shared the dinner table with many remarkable Metis women. They told stories about a lifetime of challenges and accomplishments. They recalled how it had been confusing and difficult at times, growing up Metis. They also shared stories about how they refused to allow these difficulties to stand in the way of their



goals and visions. Two women in particular held my intrigue. They seemed to have overcome so much -- and done so well. How had they made this possible?

I was struck by their strength and resiliency. I was curious to hear more about their stories, as their experiences resonated with stories that were told and lived within my own family -- a family shaped by a Metis heritage. My curiosity was more than personal though, as a young woman taking up a new career in counseling psychology, and with intentions to work with Aboriginal women, I sensed a wealth of knowledge before me that could shape and inform my professional practice.

The seed was planted that evening and grew. I drove home from the dinner party planning my intentions and fleshing out a narrative-based inquiry into the identity processes of Aboriginal women. I prepared my doctoral proposal for candidacy and defended it. When my ethics application was approved, I contacted two Metis women I knew to find out if they would agree to share more of their narratives of experience. They both agreed. My third participant came by way of suggestion by committee member, Dr. Jean Clandinin. Jean offered me the name of the woman who would eventually become my third storyteller. Although I did not have a prior connection with the third participant, her stories would prove to be equally powerful.

I am aware of being somewhat vague here, however I do so in order to maintain the anonymity of two of my participants. A copy of the "Participation Consent Form" is provided in Appendix A.



## **E. Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Department of Educational Psychology, at the University of Alberta, prior to beginning this inquiry. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant. Written consent outlined the nature and purpose of my inquiry, the rights of participants (e.g. the right to withdraw without penalty, remain anonymous, and to have decision-making power with regard to their confidential information).

In addition to these ethical issues, I was also cognizant of relational ethics that needed to be attended to throughout the inquiry process. I was aware that I held ethical responsibilities as I came together with these Aboriginal women to listen to their stories and to re-tell of our collaborative stories. More specifically, I wanted to ensure that the participants felt comfortable in my portrayal of their identity process and in my portrayal of our collaborative process. It was my hope that each woman would feel portrayed in a fitting and appropriate manner, and safe enough within our working relationship to communicate desired changes or omissions to the final research text.

In attempting to meet this end, every opportunity was given to participants to offer feedback, request omissions, or suggest changes. Invitations to do so were extended throughout the research process; when obtaining informed consent, when engaging in our research conversations, when presenting participants with transcribed field texts, when presenting participants with written research text about them, and again several times during the writing of the larger dissertation document.



I should make mention here, that I wrote the three research text participant stories over the course of a three year period. I wrote each piece in the order that I began the research conversations with each woman. Dina's piece was completed in the winter of 1999. I then, regrettably, took a self-imposed, and lengthy, two-year hiatus from research writing while I juggled a complex array of professional and personal situations. I spent this first hiatus year completing a full time pre-doctoral internship at the Workers' Compensation Board in Edmonton. Interferences during the second year, came in the form of securing paid work, preparing for and taking the written and oral licensing examinations for chartering as a psychologist in Alberta, acting on a decision to begin my own private practice, and on a more personal note, seeing an eleven year relationship with my husband come to a sad close.

I returned to my research writing during the winter of 2001. Audrey's piece was the second of the three written, with Amy's completed a month after Audrey's. The writing of these last two pieces seemed to flow forth with greater ease. I supposed I was writing from a more experienced place in life. I mention this, so to situate the place of my more recent writing voice for readers. Slight evidence of my researcher voice, writing and living from a different place, may be apparent. Making my shifting identity-story more apparent, may hold significance for readers, since I knew myself to be writing from an inevitably re-shaped place in my own life-story, as I worked with the narratives shared by Audrey and Amy.

Ethical issues of ownership with regard to narrative inquiry have been debated in the literature (Archibald, 1992; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Haig-Brown, 1992; LaRocque, 1990). Like narrative inquirers, Clandinin and Connelly, and writers of





Aboriginal women's stories, Archibald, Haig-Brown, and LaRocque, I too have reconciled ethical ownership issues by concluding, "questions of [narrative] ownership are not as important as are questions of responsibilities to those with whom we are in relation" (Clandinin & Connelly, p. 177). Fostering research relationships from a position of respect, sensitivity, and open collaboration informed my sense-making with regard to dilemmas of this nature.

In practicing from this respectful collaborative stance, I invited response throughout the process. For Dina, her response was extended to me within days of reading her piece. At the onset of meeting for research purposes, she asked to remain anonymous and to have family names changed. When she phoned me to share her thoughts regarding her piece she expressed feeling pleased and emotionally moved with what felt like a well-represented and fitting account of her experience. She explained that participating in the inquiry process, and reading the collaboratively shaped research text, "had a transformative effect" on her. She went on to say:

*It was certainly a growing experience in itself ...seeing things in print, in black and white, and reading it, had a profound effect on my understanding of my life and who I am ...it really affected me ... reminded me of how I have come through so much in my life ... so many positive things have happened because of this that have shaken me from my roots in a very, very good way ... (phone conversation, January 16, 1999).*

Response from Amy was phoned in to me four weeks after sending her our collaborative piece. She explained that she held back from contacting me while she did some thinking about a request she wanted to make. She went on to say that she had read most of her piece the day it arrived in the mail. She added:



*I cried when I read it. I cried because it was so personal. It was so 'me'. I thought about this for a while and decided I want everything written about me to remain as it is because it is a very good paper and does fit my experience really well. But I want my name changed because it is so personal. I also wanted to tell you how much I admire your writing ability and the way you fit my stories together. It was a very worthwhile project ... (phone conversation, March 29, 2001).*

I assured her I would honor her decision to remain anonymous and asked if she had a name in mind. She replied, "I always liked the name Amy". So "Amy" she became.

Audrey and I spoke on the telephone a few weeks after sending her the draft of her written piece. She was leaving for Ottawa and told me she would read the work while on the airplane. She told me she would contact me if there were any changes she thought necessary. At this time of writing, I have not heard back from her. I indicated, through a follow-up telephone message, that I must move ahead with this research process and would therefore use her piece as it stood. It is my hope that her silence is representative of her quiet consent.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### NARRATIVES OF EXPERIENCE: RACQUEL

Stories from my past and present are what brought me to this research.

Stories from my past and present attended quietly to the stories told by Dina, Audrey, and Amy. My own stories of experience became the lens through which I heard and made sense of their stories. It is therefore important that I put forward a small selection of my own narratives of experience. It is my hope in doing so, that my stories will offer readers some insight into who I am, and more specifically, the values, views, and experiences I carried with me as I engaged in this collaborative inquiry process. Through sharing narrative fragments from my own personal and professional experiences, I hope to illuminate a sense of the process that shaped and informed my interest in Aboriginal women's identity experiences.

As with any life, there are many stories I could tell, but here are just a few ...

\* \* \*

*I have an old photograph of my maternal grandfather, holding me when I was five months old, my mom stands next to him, pregnant with my brother. This photo is all I knew of this man. My mom did not know very much more. He died of a heart attack a month after the photo was taken.*

*This man was a mystery, not just to me, but to my mother too. He was around only long enough to father four children. Then he disappeared for fourteen years. He found logging jobs that took him far from home. My mom did not know why he left or where he went.*

*My mom recalls visitors to her home during these fatherless years, they were Cree people from Manitoba. They came looking for a long lost relation who had, years earlier, left a reserve north of Winnipeg to work on the railroad. My mother did not know these people, she did not know any of her paternal relations.*



*However, sitting around the kitchen table with these unknown visitors, she learned that her absent father was a Cree-Assiniboine Indian who had quietly disappeared off his reserve, without being heard from again. His Assiniboine grandmother, a woman who had migrated to Manitoba, from the Dakota-Montana border, with a Cree fur trader during the buffalo hunts of the late 1800's, had raised him.*

*Hearing all of this deepened my mother's sense of loss, since she was to learn that there existed in Manitoba a lineage of relations and stories that had been kept mysteriously silenced.*

*When diabetes had eventually stolen his eyesight, and his logging livelihood, my mother's father surfaced. He lived for three or four more years, quietly withdrawn into a back bedroom of the family home before dying.*

*I saw the pain this confusing loss experience had upon my mother. I often wondered how this early experience affected her unfolding sense of self.*

\*       \*       \*

*A large part of my early life was spent living and working onboard a salmon fishing boat on the pacific west coast. From the time I was five until my early twenties, I was involved in a commercial fishing lifestyle that included traveling into many Native communities along northern British Columbia.*

*The docks I grew up on were stage to a strange microcosm of stories being lived in the midst of chaos. I watched and listened to these dramas unfold on the cedar stages around me. I often felt like an audience member, a reflective observer. My habit of watching led my dad to call me "eagle-eyes". My social commentary, regarding what seemed a chaotic state of affairs, led to him calling me "a feminist".*

*The women I knew there were Native. Even through my childhood eyes, it seemed to me that these women often lived terribly constraining and disempowering scripts. Their struggles were plenty. The entire scene seemed a sad mixture of abuses. Alcohol, drugs, poverty, neglect, children having children, black eyes, sore bones, suicide attempts, and drownings.*

*I often wondered how these women made sense of who they were. I wondered what it would take in order for them to create more coherent and desired life-stories.*

\*       \*       \*





*One woman I knew did attempt to create a more meaningful life-story. She boarded a ferry to Vancouver one day and never came back. She had grown tired of his one fist in her eye and a bottle in his other.*

*Four of their shared children were left behind. They roamed the docks and streets, sometimes for days at a time. When the R.C.M.P. picked the kids up Social Services was called in. The kids were going to be removed.*

*He asked us to take custody of his nine-year-old daughter. She returned with us to Edmonton later that Fall when salmon fishing was over. It was her first time in-land away from her Native fishing community. She stayed the winter with us in Edmonton, attending an all white elementary school, going to girl guides, and playing on a baseball team. The culture shock must have been terrible. By late spring, as we wound our way through the Rocky and Coastal mountains, back out to Prince Rupert, she made the decision to remain in her community. Custody arrangements with her granny made this possible.*

*She gave birth to a son four years later. The child died in his first year of shaking baby syndrome. Her nineteen-year-old boyfriend had been drunk when this took place.*

*I often wondered how, or if, she would ever make sense of who she was. I wondered what it would take in order for her to create a more coherent and desired life-story.*

\* \* \*

*During the winters my parents commercially fished the frozen lakes in Alberta. My dad also tended a trap-line near Slave Lake and worked as a hunting guide for a Native Outfitter.*

*I seemed to grow up on water. My parents tell me before I could crawl they had me on the lakes pulling fishing nets with them. I grew up surrounded by a circle of very hard working people who knew how to live off the land. I played, and eventually worked, alongside many Native fishermen.*

*They seemed a part of our family. They shared their stories, jokes, medicines, and support. When my father was dying of cancer, it was these long time friends who shared their ceremonies, sent their medicines and prayers, offered words of condolence, and who eventually walked alongside my brother to help him carry the casket.*

*These experiences shaped my own sense of who I was.*

\* \* \*



*Dr. Anne Anderson taught the Cree language. She will be remembered as a key person who revived this almost lost language through her years of teaching and writing about Cree syllabics and culture.*

*My parents began a friendship with Anne when I was a child. They were very fond of her. Both my mom and dad wanted to learn to speak and write Cree so they joined Anne's classes.*

*A self-shaping friendship began, one that is difficult to put into words. This is because in gentle, yet powerful ways, our knowing Anne touched all of our lives. Through this relationship my mom was able to learn the words of her own silent legacy. Through this relationship my dad was able to bond with a maternal spirit. And through this relationship I was able to deepen and authenticate my own understanding of health and healing, by working with Anne on my master's thesis, A Cree Elder's Philosophy of Health and Healing (1996).*

*I know our unique experiences with Anne shaped each of our understandings of who we were, and who we preferred to be.*

*My mom continues to proudly practice and learn her Cree language.*

*My dad, during his final days with cancer, broke his isolation from all except immediate family, by asking to speak to Anne. He wanted to say good-bye.*

*I continue to think of Anne and her kind inspiring ways.*

\* \* \*

*About ten years ago, my mom decided to research her paternal genealogy. She sent away to the Winnipeg archives and Manitoba government to acquire information. All she had was her father's name, but it was a place to start. Papers soon arrived in the mail. She began to acquire various names, dates, land titles, and cemetery locations.*

*As the information trickled in she began to construct a family tree. It was a like making a puzzle. She spent hours tediously sifting through documents, acquiring dates of birth, dates of death, children's names, marriages, re-marriages, places of origin, and final resting places.*

*Essentially, she was piecing together the story of who she was and where she came from.*

*When she had done all she could from the kitchen table in our home, she said to my dad, "Now I need to go there". She had never been to Manitoba. She had never met any of her paternal relations. They packed the car and went.*



*When my parents returned from Manitoba, I greeted my mom as she walked through the kitchen door. "So, how was it!", I asked.*

*Her emotion broke through and she cried, "It's all there, they are all there, the head stones, the cemeteries, the land ... we even met people who are my cousins! They knew who I came from!". She returned with books, documents, and photos that fleshed out the silenced stories of her ancestors. It was a joy to see the excitement this process created within her. Solving such a long and painful mystery seemed to authenticate her own sense of self.*

*I was forever struck by how this genealogical endeavor impacted my mom's sense of who she was and how she could create a more coherent life-story.*

\* \* \*

*My own sense of self has been shaped through these fragments of experience. When I began a career in the counselling profession, I was naturally drawn back to the community and issues that shaped me.*

*I focused my master's thesis in counselling on Native health and healing. I spent several months in Hobbema schools doing assessments in order to help secure funding for special education classes. Later, I spent a year facilitating several specialized groups for elementary aged children on the Ermineskin reserve. More recently, I joined with Aboriginal women and their stories while facilitating an anger management group at the Edmonton Institution For Women. At present, I am a chartered psychologist in private practice, and am an approved service provider for First Nations and Inuit Health.*

*As I engaged in each of these professional experiences, I again encountered stories that were hard to make sense of, and again I found myself wondering what sort of process might assist these individuals in creating more coherent and meaningful life-stories.*

\* \* \*

Each of these personal and professional experiences served to shape the values and views I brought into this inquiry. When I look back, I feel I have been spectator to some of the most disempowering, and some of the most empowering, scripts lived by Aboriginal women. I have been deeply affected by what I have seen. My thinking about the varied collage of Aboriginal women's experiences, and the



implications of such, has been further shaped by values and beliefs that are associated with the feminist perspective (Miller, 1988).

Long before I even knew what “a feminist” stood for, I began to be deeply bothered by oppressive social practices and what I perceived as abuses of power towards women, especially Aboriginal women. This stance grew even firmer as I experienced more of life. I therefore join the research stories at hand, with a long-standing interest regarding what seems to facilitate an identity of empowerment, esteem, and coherence for Aboriginal women.





## CHAPTER FIVE

### NARRATIVES OF EXPERIENCE: DINA\*

#### THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A PIONEER

*pioneer - (n.) one who goes ahead (v.) to do or be first.  
(Webster Dictionary, 1951)*

*Survival in any landscape comes down to  
making the best use of all available resources  
(Silko, 1996, p. 35)*

- As indicated, all metaphors were co-constructed through the context of our research conversations. Despite this, some have said that a “pioneer” metaphor does not fit with the traditional Aboriginal worldview or experience. In response to this, I wish to emphasize that I worked from a collaborative narrative framework, I therefore subscribed to the belief that I am in no way an expert or authority regarding the images or metaphors that should, or shouldn’t, resonate with meaning for individuals. Instead I worked to understand and respect the meaning-making sense of each of my participants regarding their own processes. It is my belief that they, and only they, can be the true experts of what they attach meaning and positive significance to. It is my hope that readers experience this “pioneer” piece in this same spirit.
- ALL NAMES USED IN THIS STORY ARE PSEUDONYMS.  
THE PARTICIPANT REQUESTED THAT HER IDENTITY REMAIN ANONYMOUS.



## THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A PIONEER

### Chapter One

#### Adverse Times in the Home-Land:

##### *Growing Up Amidst Non-sensical "Rejected, Inefficient, Not Worthy" Stories*

Pioneer stories often begin long before these determined and courageous individuals move away from settled ground and embark into the unknown, in hopes of overcoming hardships and securing a more satisfying and meaningful life. Often their stories begin by telling of the discontented contexts and conditions from which these brave spirits set out to abandon.

Dina's pioneer story is really no different. That is, this account of how she has continued to author a more empowering story of her self, also begins with a contextualization of the adversely oppressive scene into which Dina was born. For Dina has lived by many stories during her life, but it has really been in her later adult years that she has managed to move away from the, "rejected...inefficient...and not worthy" story, which she now realizes she spent much of her earlier life living by (Dina, p. 70). In order to really understand how Dina has come to author the, "I am a powerful woman" story, she lives and tells today, you as reader, will first need a sense of the historical and social context within which Dina's life-story was initially embedded (Dina, p. 9).



Dina is a Metis woman. She was born some fifty years ago, just north of St. Albert, Alberta, to a Cree mother and a British father. As Dina described her childhood she regretfully stated that her mother, "never spoke of her Nativeness" (Dina, p. 5). But as Dina explained, "in those years it wasn't something that you talked about." When I asked Dina why this might have been, she went on to tell me about her maternal grandmother who was also "ashamed of her Nativeness" (Dina, p. 4):

*My grandmother grew up in the convent ... she hated the convent, she absolutely hated the convent. She hated Catholicism. Ohh, she told stories of the nuns, and the things that happened, and the near starvation! ... She would tell stories about a place that the kids found in the convent where they could sneak in ... and they would see the nuns at the tables while they were eating and they'd see the stuff that would be piled on the tables! And that to her was something that she just couldn't understand -- well who could understand it?! It was wrong! So I think [the poor treatment at the convent] had a great deal to do with her not loving her Nativeness.*

*And she never spoke of her family that much -- and going back and relating dates, her mother lived until she was quite old ... I think that probably it was ... because [my grandmother] was so far removed from [her Nativeness] because when you're in the convent you wouldn't speak of your family, you couldn't speak your language, so I think that there was the gradual losing of it (Dina, p. 3-4).*

This "gradual losing of it" would prove to be a tragic loss, not just for Dina's grandmother, but also for her grandmother's future family -- her own daughter, and her daughter's daughter, Dina. This "gradual losing of it" would prove to be deeply connected to an intergenerational loss of identity, a loss of a sense of self -- essentially, a loss of coherence and meaning within the many self-stories which would eventually flow forth from this woman's own fragmented story. As Dina explained, "it was the loss of their identity ... it was the identity that the priests and the nuns chose for them, which was totally foreign to them, totally foreign" (Dina, p. 11).



So much was lost when Dina's grandmother, and later her mother, were separated from their family and cultural heritage and forced to live at the convent. And the losses were long lived. After Dina's grandmother left the convent, at sixteen, she had very little contact with her own parents and family. Voids were created within self-stories. Where self-knowledge and a sense of connectedness had once existed, shadows of confusion and emptiness now prevailed.

Dina continues to be confused by these shadows. Even the circumstances surrounding her own mother's marriage, and her great-grandmother's absence from this significant event, leaves her saddened and perplexed:

*I have tried to piece that together and I've tried to go back in my mind to what would have happened because my great grandmother would have been alive when my mother and father married. Where was she? Does that make sense? It doesn't make any sense at all! So, it was such a buried thing ... I guess with my grandmother never even keeping in contact with her relatives there would be no reason my mom would ... (Dina, p. 82-83).*

One can only imagine the confusion these separations would infuse upon attempts to secure a coherent and meaningful story of self. What a difficult struggle for these women. Missing these family stories, as a child, silenced the many possible ways these rich ancestral storylines could have informed Dina's developing story of her self. These intergenerational losses affected Dina's own sense of self directly:

*It certainly is a great, great loss that they never talked of their heritage because when I think about it ... I have the book knowledge of what happened with Natives ... but I don't have the experience. I could have shared that with my grandmother. I don't have that ... I mean [she had] a tremendously rich heritage and I just ... I can't imagine the life that she could have led. It's unbelievable ... (Dina, p. 82).*

So much was non-sensical, so much was lost. Dina has struggled with the non-sensical nature of this situation since she was a young child. She can recall being





as young as six or seven years old when she first began to realize "the strangeness" of this situation:

*My mother ... used to go and visit just certain members of the family ... I basically knew that it was strange that we didn't visit the relatives and I knew that there was a Nativeness ... but not really understanding what it was about. It's just, like I say, the herd of elephants going through the living room but we don't acknowledge that they're there (Dina, p. 83).*

These intergenerational silences made for a childhood that was void of any discussion or demonstration of pride regarding Dina's Aboriginal ancestry. But the emptiness of these silenced messages were perhaps 'easier' to contend with, when compared to the stinging racism and abuse her father and his British family contributed to Dina's initial sense of self.

Dina has described her British father as "a racist pig" and "a bigot" who acquired his narrow-mindedness from the parental story within which he himself was embedded. As a result, Dina's father came to live by a story informed by the notion that being British meant being "superior" to Dina's mother and her visible Aboriginal heritage.

Dina explained that this oppressive paternal story bred a context of "hardness ... cruelty ... bitterness ... and a lack of compassion" into her own childhood story (Dina, p. 46). In Dina's opinion, her paternal grandparents sense of superiority was made even more damaging by their "black and white thinking", which was fostered by their strict adherence to the "Old Christianity" story they lived their lives by, a story which Dina summarized as, "Don't become a Christian because you love God, but become a Christian because you don't want to go to hell!" (p. 44).

This oppressive atmosphere informed the self-story Dina's mother eventually settled into, and lived by, upon marrying Dina's father. The disempowering plotline in this next narrative illuminates the type of story Dina's mother succumbed to living



within the marriage. It also provides a sense of the story scene Dina would eventually be born into:

*My mom was very, very young ... when they had been married and she told a story. [My paternal grandparents] were from Bon Accord and they had a farm and my mom's parents lived ... many miles away. My mother never did drive, so she walked. When [my parents] first got married they lived with my father's parents. And his mother, my dad's mother, had no use for my mother and she picked on her and my mother lost the baby. The baby was born full term but died in the evening stillborn. And my mother [left the hospital and] went back home to their farm and there was no sympathy, nothing. It was like, 'You lost the kid, it's a fact, it's gone, get on with your life!'*

*... And that's the way they were and of course my mom grieved that child. That child was very, very important. She was only eighteen when she married and she got pregnant right away ... So she left my dad and walked miles and miles back to her parents place. She said it was a couple of days and my father drove to my mom's parents place and she said there was nothing discussed, nothing. He just said (in a stern voice), 'I'm here, it's time to go home'. And she left. And she said there was no discussion about it ... the loss of that child was never discussed (Dina, p. 46-47).*

Dina reflected often upon the tormented life her mother lived by settling within such an oppressive marriage:

*I can feel the pain when I just think of my father today. Because my father is very British and he's very ethnocentric. I can't imagine the pain my mother went through. My mother was an extremely secretive person in many ways in her life, she was very quiet. I think that my mother died of many illnesses ... she had a lot of stress related illnesses. I often think how in the world could she have gone from a home with my [maternal] grandparents, where there was so much loving and kindness, ... how she could go from that situation to a cold man like my father. It must have been -- well obviously when she died, her body was in torment ... and to me that was what her life was like with my father. I can't imagine the pain that she went through. And my father hated my grandmother, just hated her.*

*And I mean there's the 'Christianity' for you! It just really bothers me that -- because to me the Christianity is the uniqueness of the wholeness of one -- you don't say, 'I'm a Christian because I go to church on Sunday'. Christianity is what you are. It is what you feel. And you cannot feel that and then say, 'Well it's "them" and "us"!'* (Dina, p. 7).



But as painful and tormenting as it may have been, Dina's mother made the choice to stay in this relationship. Eventually this marriage would produce healthy children, all born into this adverse context, informed and influenced by larger disempowering social and historical stories. Five children in total arrived upon this scene, with Dina being the second youngest. And as Dina recalled so vividly, the few ancestral family stories which *were* spoken, flowed forth from this oppressive and confusing paternal scene:

*My grandfather left Britain with a brother to come work in the mines. He was a miner in Britain and he came here with my father when he was 18 months old and his sister was 6 months old ... and thinking back over it, they had many, many stories to tell. And those were the stories that I grew up with because of their pride of who they were -- that very, very superior British thinking. And I learned so much about that when I studied colonialism. I think it fits, the picture fits exactly, it's storybook telling, no it's textbook telling of the way their lives are and their thinking. My grandfather fought in the Boer War and had magnificent, magnificent tales to tell of 'those' people (great emphasis on 'those'). You know what I'm saying? It was like, "Well, we came to help 'those' people."*

*When we went to my father's side, which was a Sunday ritual, obviously they had antiques and we went and we SAT! And of course my grandfather smoked a pipe and when he was ready he told us tales that were very fascinating. My grandfather had HIS chair with a little table at his side and he sat there and he smoked his pipe. And we would sit on the chesterfield in this neat little row, and we had to sit very still and very quiet. And it was like, when HE was all sat back and relaxed with his pipe in position -- then HE would talk. And he would tell us tales about the big ships in the Boer War and he'd tell us about standing aboard the ships and how 'they' (emphasized, meaning Africans) would row up to them in their small boats and then they'd ... turn it into a game ... (Dina, p. 36-37).*

Dina's paternal grandmother, described as "one mean bitch", also made it clear to Dina that there was a distinct line differentiating the two of them (Dina, p. 60). Through childhood encounters such as this one, little Dina soon resigned her self to live by the non-sensical story of "them" and "us":





*She was cruel ... very, very, cruel ... Did I tell you about her kicking me off of her lap? I had tried to crawl on her lap, she said (in a low angry voice), 'DONT -- YOU -- DARE -- I'm not like your other grandmother!'. And I thought, you're right lady! ... So I've seen the cruelty in my father and I'm sure that comes from his mother (Dina, p. 60).*

Dina's father, raised and shaped within this oppressive context himself, learned to adopt this "ethnocentric" story his parents lived their lives by. Some of Dina's most poignant childhood memories of her father involved hearing him say things like, "He's a real Indian, BUT, he's actually a good guy!". Sundays at church were also extremely difficult times because these public situations demanded cover-ups by the family, while her father made embarrassing racist reprimands:

*I grew up in a tremendously strict and religious home ... Baptist ... and that to me is what really just blows my mind. How I can be abused day after day after day in the home and yet I'm expected to go to church on Sunday? And we'd have this beautiful front on the family that goes to church, yet we'd have hell behind the closed door. I still haven't really come to grips with the horrors of my childhood ... ohhh (emotion filled pause), my father is just a racist pig, he's just a bigot and it would be like, 'They let those people in church?!', -- and he'd be speaking of other races ... I just don't understand the racism in my family (Dina, p. 6-7).*

For Dina, childhood was a treacherous story of survival amidst the larger disempowering and non-sensical storylines she was nested within. Unfortunately, an all too common story for some children. But perhaps it was the all too common landscape that she attempted to navigate within her home, which was the most adverse:

*My father hated my reading, absolutely hated my reading. And I would even try to read at the kitchen table, at a meal, because I hated -- I hated -- I hated meal time. When my father would come home, he's such a strict disciplinarian, and when my father came home the home was different. There was no talking, there was no laughter -- it was my father. And my father had*





*routines for everything and he would come in and his lunch bucket had to be put here and when my family sat down the meal was cooked -- NOW! And my father told of his day, but we didn't -- we essentially didn't matter. My mother was FOR my father, so there's a lot of anger and hate there -- on my part. And I think I've had to -- I've really struggled to forgive ... I still feel the abuse from him because of his controlling and his non-love, 'I am your father therefore I am', and to me that is garbage (Dina, p. 29-30).*

But living within the home with a "racist" and "controlling" father was only part of the daily childhood plotline Dina was forced to inhabit. Years of sexual abuse, at the hands of a relative in the home, comprised yet another thread of the bewildering confusion that Dina's childhood story of self was housed within.

One day while meeting with Dina we looked through her beautiful album of cherished black and white family photographs. One of the photos was of her parents and all of the children standing in front of an old 1940's style truck, with an old cabin and a shimmering lake in the background. Everyone appeared to be happy. Everyone was smiling anyway. But, as we looked at this particular photograph, Dina went on to tell me:

*This picture is one that I've had blown up and this is the most important picture of my life ... I had suppressed my sex abuse for so many years and I could look through pictures like this -- pictures of me ... and it would be like looking through pictures of you. I didn't remember any of my childhood. And to finally come to grips with my sex abuse and my abuser -- everything came back, all the memories came back around. I could remember the color, I could remember what was on the counter, I could remember the table, I could remember so much better. And my childhood was a real blur until that time (Dina, p. 31).*

Upon hearing more of Dina's childhood abuse, and the destructive impact it had upon her sense of self, it became clear that her mother had sadly chosen to live by a powerless-breeding story otherwise known as, Denial. It was this maternal story of Denial, that would inflict further confusing fractures into Dina's early attempts to author an empowering and sensical story of her self. After all, how is it possible to



nurture a firm sense of personal strength and efficacy, when trapped within a situation with characters laying claim to the ownership of one's body? How is it possible to compose an empowered sense of self, when one's attempts to give voice to the ravages of such a story, are met with disbelieving Denial?

*I just wish that I could have forgiven earlier and come to terms with my life earlier, so that I wouldn't have led the destructive past that I did. My life has been very, very destructive -- so much self-hate. Yeah, I do pity myself sometimes, I do feel sorry for myself sometimes, because my youth was taken from me, my innocence was taken from me. That's not something that I wanted in my life. And the most important thing was -- you get your sense [of who you are] from your family, and I didn't have that -- I was abused. And to not only be abused by somebody in your family, but then to go to your mother, and your mother to refuse to keep you safe. It took me until my forties to realize how much I hated her, how much I hated her guts that I went to her, told her of my abuse, and she didn't do anything. How can a mother do that to a child? I don't know -- I have no idea (Dina, p. 30).*

A Child -- without a body to truly embrace as one's own, without a voice that is truly perceived as heard and acknowledged, is left with very little from which to piece together an empowering script of one's own.

As a young child, without the acknowledgment or assistance of others, Dina was unable to physically escape such a harrowing scene. It must have seemed an impossible situation. To make matters worse, her existence within this non-sensical story was supported by the adults around her, who seemed to advocate living within the confines of this disempowering story. Feeling trapped within the adversity of this home-land, Dina turned to a story world she created through her imagination in order to distance her self from the daily turmoil of life at home:

*Abused children don't feel like they belong anywhere ... and that's been my life, I have been different. You keep that door closed. You keep many, many doors closed, because you have to protect. And so I've been -- I was a real introverted, a very, very introverted child. And when you're so introverted you don't learn from the outside but I learned -- I had, as a child, I had the*



*cat. When I was in grade six, I learned to read and that was my life. I used to walk miles to the library to get a stack of books and that was my life. And that was my world that I created for myself -- to get my cat, to have my cat there, and to sit by myself, and to get the Eaton's catalogue, and to pour through the Eaton's catalogue, and to dream, and dream, and dream of what I didn't have. Just envisioning the world out there, 'What do people do in their homes,' you know, 'what are other people like?' (Dina, p. 29).*

Here, within her "envisioned world", Dina was able to at least escape on some level. Here, she was able to wonder about "the world out there", even though she was not yet able to embark into these unknown frontier lands. And so it seems that the beginnings of Dina's pioneer spirit began to gradually surface here in childhood, as she questioned and imagined the other possible stories lived by people outside of her own confusing home-land.



## Chapter Two

### The Initial Shaping of a Budding Pioneer:

#### *Experiences Which Nurtured Her Story of Self*

Embedded within such a difficult childhood home-land, Dina was confined in many ways within the story her parents had composed their lives around. As we have seen, she attempted to distance her self from this home-land story by reading and dreaming about the other possible life-stories being lived in the world around her. But dreaming and wondering about these other alternative life-stories, within the scope of her mind's eye, was about as far as Dina could feasibly embark at such a young age. Although her desire to search for a more satisfying story was strong, Dina, like so many who can only dream of taking up a pioneer lifestyle, was for the meantime situated within the cruel reality of having few options or resources to allow for more extensive exploration into these other possible territories.

A difficult situation indeed. But there was a source of strength and empowerment that young Dina could borrow from ... and did. This source was that of her maternal grandparents. As Dina explained, these gentle and resourceful people lived an inspiring story within which Dina took refuge. As a child, she went to live at their acreage every summer, which fronted the banks of the Sturgeon River. It was here that she gradually gathered the resources she would later rely on as she edged away from the homeland she so desperately sought to abandon.

\*       \*       \*

Within minutes of our first formal research conversation together, while still in the process of settling back into my couch, Dina very beautifully and succinctly shared with me the empowering story she has come to live her life by (Connelly & Clandinin, in press). "I ~ am ~ a ~ powerful ~ woman" (Dina, 1998). Silence. She sent each word into the room with potency and self-assured strength. It clearly was





her story -- the story she now lives and tells of her self. This was how we began. This was how she began explaining how she came to create an empowered story of who she is.

Having situated her place within the strengthening self-story she now inhabits, Dina then turned her storytelling to the past, in order to help me understand the experiences which shaped her into the "powerful woman" she is today. She began to tell stories about her maternal grandparents and the strength and love they infused into her young story of self:

*My grandmother was an amazing woman. She was so tiny! ... She was really, really, tiny but she was a powerhouse. Ohh, her place was absolutely immaculate! She sewed -- everything! I mean there wasn't anything that she didn't sew. So she sewed for the community. They lived on a farm for a while and then they moved to Namaio and they had a lovely little home there. It was just a two bedroom shack. Grandpa had built it and then there were the three add-ons too (laughing).*

*And I can remember I spent every summer there as a child. And of course Namaio was much different then. I mean the Sturgeon River used to be called the "Mighty Sturgeon" and now it's just a rambling brook. Me and my grandpa always used to go traveling on the river -- we used to go across the river and way up to go picking for berries and nuts and things. So it was beautiful, beautiful there! That was -- that was -- my, MY time, because it was usually just myself who would go there in the summer ...*

*But she was a very, very powerful woman. Such a diminutive little soul and yet she had so much passion and warmth. My grandfather was six feet tall and they spoke in French a lot and she would still sit on his knee -- as old as they were! And I don't speak French so I don't know how he would say it but he'd say, "Old Girl" and she'd say, "Old Man" and yet it was a loving thing, not like "this is my old man", it wasn't derogatory. So they were very, very kind and extremely loving and they celebrated their sixty-third wedding anniversary.*

*But they were "The Rock", they were the rock of my life. I really don't think I'd be alive today if I didn't have my grandparents because my homelife was not good at all. I had a lot of abuse in my home. So that was my refuge. And my grandmother spent a lot of time in my home because my mother was very ill and my grandmother basically raised us for about three years.*



*But my grandmother would not sit beside you without picking up your hand, and she would stroke your hand, and she would play with your hair. She was just kindness and love personified ...*

*"My girl, come here my girl." -- that was her favorite saying. And she would sit and talk. They had about five or seven acres of property and it was heavily, heavily treed. And they had a bench and each evening they would go out and sit on the bench and Granny would always bring her work, her seamstress work, and she would sit there and sew and talk. Wonderful, wonderful times we had ... (Dina, p. 3-5, 7-9).*

Before our second research conversation together, I asked Dina if there were any special "memory pieces" she might like to show me which would generate more storytelling around how she has constructed or authored her story of who she is. She arrived at my home the following week with a binder full of her family's genealogy information as well as a family photo album. As we looked through photographs of her pioneering grandparents and their acreage, she again shared warm memories of living with these resourceful and inspiring relations:

*(Looking at grandparent's wedding photo) And here is a picture of my grandparents, and grandma made her wedding dress. And my mother wore that veil and headpiece, and my sister did ...*

*(Looking at another photo of her grandmother standing outside of their farm house) I happened to notice that I had a coat almost identical to Granny's. And this photo was taken in 1947. This would be around Bon Accord where they lived at that time. They were very, very talented. My uncle was a fiddler and my grandmother could play the accordion and piano and guitar. And so this is a picture of the acreage where they lived after they had fixed it up ...*

*Yah, [the acreage is] a real peace, it's a real comfort, an absolute comfort to me when I go out there. They married on my grandfather's birthday and he said she was the greatest birthday present he ever got. So sweet. July 5, 1950. And she died in '77 and he died in '76. And there probably isn't a picture in here where she didn't sew everything that she's wearing and he's wearing! She sewed everything for them ...*

*As I look at these [photos] now I remember the feeling of -- that place was comfort and serenity. Well granny used to have the 'famous' trunk full of her different things and she would pull out -- probably every summer when I*



*would go there she would pull out the trunk and show her different things from her childhood. She had just a few things from her parents ...*

*And of course there wasn't any electricity back then or heat and I can remember sitting there and we had a beautiful antique dining room suite and that's where granny would sit and write in the evenings. Not in the winter time though because then most of the time was spent in the kitchen where it was warm. And then of course we went to bed with the birds because we couldn't spend too much on fuel so we went to bed really early with the birds and got up at the crack of dawn with the birds ...*

*My [maternal] grandfather and grandmother had this beautiful acreage, these two old people, and yet they had this garden that probably covered half a block. And my grandfather lived for the garden, he lived for nature. In spring, first thing in the morning he was out there and he was with -- the dirt, he was with the earth. And when I would spend time with my grandfather it was like, "Well, we're going to do this today. Just watch." It was just a natural thing. And it was the doing of it together that was the wonderful, wonderful thing. And both of my grandparents were of very, very few words ... My grandfather spoke very few words but when we were together it was, "Well -- look at all of the raspberries that have been left." And he'd show me, he'd say, "If we pick up the leaves gently, you'll see them."*

*Whereas with my [paternal] grandfather, it was, "How could you be so stupid?! Can't you see all of the berries that are left there?!" Negative, there was so much of the negative. Whereas with my [maternal] grandfather he was saying basically the same thing but in such a kind and caring way, like, "Maybe we should just go back and check. Maybe we can find some more berries." And he'd show me the damage that the bugs had done to the plants and the holistic way of not using sprays but instead going around picking the bugs off and putting tin cans around them. They were just gentle, gentle people. They were just -- there -- they were just in their essence. And in their holistic way they were just at peace with themselves ... One of my biggest inspirations have been my [maternal] grandparents -- thinking of how they would do things, how they would work through things -- rather than being so destructive, so very destructive (Dina, p. 24-25, 36-37).*

While saying good-bye to Dina, after looking through her photographs, I asked her a question. I wondered aloud if there was any particular place that she might like to show me, so as to help further reflect some of the significant experiences that had shaped her unfolding story of self. She immediately replied, "The acreage -- my grandparent's old acreage, we could go out there and walk





around!" A few weeks later, on a hot Sunday afternoon, I picked her up and we drove out to the rural Namaio acreage that was the sustaining and strengthening "Rock" of Dina's childhood story.

Accompanied by the gentleman who now owns the property, we spent the afternoon walking around investigating the layout of the land as Dina reminisced about her time spent living at this "real haven of rest" (p. 72). We looked inside of the old wooden cabin her grandparents lived in, walked down to the river bank, surveyed the old garden areas, and strolled around the grassy river front plateau which used to be the site of family picnics. Later, after completing our tour of the area, we found some shade under a cluster of tall pine trees and sat down in the grass. It was then that I asked Dina how this piece of land, and the memories it evokes, has played a role in helping her develop or author her story of who she is. And her answer seemed to speak again of how she gathered strength and inspiration from these gentle, yet determined, pioneering characters:

*When I come here, when I see how little my grandparents had, and yet those were the two happiest people that I ever knew in my life. And to think of the hectic lifestyle that I have led, the destructive lifestyle I have led, it is so different than what my grandparents led. Here, they had peace and tranquility.*

*Grandpa roamed these grounds, he loved this home. He loved the property and he knew every inch of it -- where the beavers were, where the squirrels were, and he kept all those things in check -- not destructively. And same with the garden ... And to sit out there and to shell the peas and we always used to do all of the major work out there [on a bench outside of the cabin]. Cutting the tops off the beets and grandpa always had such a magnificent garden. It was so huge and it was always flourishing, always flourishing ...*

*So I think I realize the serenity of my grandparents, the contentedness of having so little and being so happy with what you have. Grandpa worked hard for this place, he worked hard on the place. And they just had a deep love for it and I take a great deal from that -- from the serenity ...*

*But I think that that's a great part of my life still today, having been a single parent for so many years, I used the resourcefulness, as my grandparents did,*





*of not having anything but using to the fullest extent what you have. That was important ...*

*We were family. When the kids would all be out here together, the laughter and the screaming and the playing, I mean, we roamed and there was no fear. No fear here, we just roamed and played and played ...*

*I've always thought back to here. This is important to me, this land here, it was the good times of my life and here is where I was okay. Here I was loved. Here I was cherished. I wasn't told I was loved -- it just was. When grandpa would say 'Come on ...', and he'd put that cap on, and we'd take the bucket and go down to the river, and go tromping through the woods, and picking berries, and getting up and going out picking raspberries and doing things. It was just the right thing to do. It was just something that needed to be done. It was just right. And that's how life -- that is how life should be. It shouldn't be the turmoil. This was a haven, this was a real haven of rest ...*

*And granny, she plugged away -- she was so crippled, my granny was 4'10", she had a lift in her shoe, a 4" lift and suffered with arthritis. Her little fingers were just twisted and yet she could sew the most beautiful seam you've ever seen. She could tear things apart and make something beautiful (Dina, p. 68-70, 72, 87).*

These influential characters played an important role in fostering and nurturing Dina's budding pioneer spirit. For it was their strength and fortitude -- their ability to, "tear things apart and make something beautiful", which would eventually inspire Dina to compose her own beautifully empowering story of self (p. 87). It was in this fashion that Dina would borrow from her grandparents' stories of "using to the fullest extent what you have", as she later authored the "I am a powerful woman" story, she tells of her self today:

*I look a lot like my grandmother. And now I can see the parallelisms in our lives, the way we feel about certain things ... I know I have that calm, I have the calm and the peace that my grandmother had and I also have an incredible amount of strength. I am a powerful woman. I wouldn't be where I am today if I hadn't found that inner strength and power -- because I married at sixteen and went into a horrible, horrible situation and I was married for a long time so ... it has been difficult ... but I've never given up. But if I didn't have that inner strength I wouldn't have been able to go on (Dina, p. 9).*



### Chapter Three

#### Living What Seemed A "Familiar" Story:

##### *Her Struggle To Compose A Story Of Self That Made Sense*

Most accounts of a pioneer life, provide some background of the budding pioneer's experience spent living, usually discontentedly, within a common settled land. Despite feeling constrained, and often unhappy, within these well-traveled areas -- many pioneering characters often find themselves living within these common lands for a time. After all, living by the road most traveled often has an alluring familiarity. Thus was the case for our budding pioneer as well ...

\* \* \*

Even though Dina was able to gain sustenance from the "The Rock" of strength her grandparents contributed to her childhood story of self, these nurturing stories were still not enough to overwrite the impact of the disempowering stories she was embedded within while at home. As Dina already alluded, growing up and composing a story of her self that made sense was a most difficult endeavor. This is understandable, when one considers the oppressive nature of the home-life story she was up against. Hers would have been a difficult story to revise and rewrite, especially when so young and so informed by the disempowering stories being supported and lived around her.

Dina's struggle to compose a self-story that made sense did not end in childhood. As she told me during our last research conversation together:

*Reading over the stories that I have told you, I see so much of what was me, was the rejection, that I have felt rejected all my life and inefficient and not -- not worthy. And so much of my life has been, 'Please, please love me. Please love me. I know I could make you happy, just please love me.' That is so apparent from all of these things that I've been telling you, and reading back over them, it's just been so plain to me how I have begged for the crumbs from the tables ... I've been begging for the crumbs all of my life (Dina, p. 70).*



From her present adult perspective, Dina is now able to recognize the "parallelisms" between the "powerful" self-story she described her grandmother as having lived by, and the "I am a powerful woman" self-story Dina lives today (p. 9). But in listening to Dina tell stories of her marriages, further "parallelisms" become apparent. However, these parallelisms exist between the disempowering marital story Dina's mother embedded her self within, and the stories Dina eventually inhabited while attempting as a young adult to flee the context of her childhood.

As Dina explained, at the age of sixteen, she viewed marriage as "a new beginning in life" (Dina, p. 84). Feeling trapped in a powerless situation at home, it seemed an alluring way of "trying to leave the past". At such a young age, Dina likely hoped that marriage would provide her a refuge, similar to the strengthening "rock" and comforting "haven" her grandparents represented. Therefore the draw towards such a possibility was a strong one:

*I was married at 16. John came into my life when I was 15 and he was quite a bit older than I was. And as a child who was raised with hardly anything, all of a sudden there's a man with a vehicle, and he's working, he's got money, and he doted on me, and picked me up, and drove me to school. Then he asked my dad if we could get married and of course both of my parents had to decide because I was only 16. And they did ... (Dina, p. 45).*

But in attempting to distance her self from the oppressive story she was embedded within at home Dina, in turn, ended up moving into yet another scenario which would prove to be just as disempowering. Shortly after marrying her first husband John, Dina soon began to realize that she had been drawn into what was beginning to feel like a familiar story. She began to realize that John lived by a similar self story as her father, and like her father, John also expected Dina to live within the constraints of his self-serving story:





*I remember sitting in that apartment [after getting married], looking out the window at those kids going to school and thinking, 'There's something wrong with this picture.' Here I am, sixteen, sitting here looking longingly at these kids having fun and thinking, 'I wish I could be there.' But things started to go sour really quick in the marriage and part of it was that he had such a control. He didn't want me working, he didn't want me out, he didn't -- it was just -- I had nothing but him. Nothing. And it was horrible, horrible, horrible ... (Dina, p. 45).*

It was not long before Dina found her self living life by a story which closely paralleled the one her mother had endured:

*The one thing that John had done is made sure that I was isolated from my family. So I barely had any contact at all with my family ... I never went to family gatherings because John wouldn't go there. Certainly I would never have even have thought of doing it on my own, of saying, 'Well I'm going to my mother's for Sunday dinner.' I would never have even thought of that. It just wasn't something that would have entered my mind. Obviously I had made a commitment to my husband and so we went where he wanted to go. I felt that that's the way I was raised. What my father said was law. My mother would never dispute it -- and I certainly wasn't about to dispute it (Dina, p. 75-76).*

Dina's husband John was not only similar to her father in his attempt to prevent her from maintaining any family connections, but he also mirrored her father in his "very cold, very calculating, very black and white" interactions with her (Dina, p. 47). Just months into the first year of marriage, Dina attempted to leave John, as she grew increasingly aware of the oppressive story she was sinking deeper into. But attempting to rewrite this marital story would prove to be difficult, especially since this story had a familiar plotline that was supported by both a controlling husband -- and father. For Dina, composing an empowering self-story that made sense, was truly difficult, when all she knew was what she had lived:

*I left John ... six or eight months after we were married ... I left him and I went home. And my mom said, 'I'm so glad you're home. I'm so glad you're home. You should never have done it, I was wrong.' So it was just my mom. And*





*then my dad came home and my mom told him. And he looked at me and he said, 'You made your bed, you're going to lie in it! You're going back!' And that was the cruelest thing that I think was ever said to me.*

*But, I've always reflected back on those words, always reflected back at that -- there I got my strength. From that horrible situation. That was the turning point between my father and I. I realized the hardness, the cruelty, the bitterness, the lack of compassion. No compassion, and to say something so cruel, 'You made your bed...' And I've often thought of that, thinking how I can still feel ... the coldness ... and I can get that real feeling of just absolute nothing -- just nothing, no emotion, nothing. It's like I'm not here -- there's no one in this body ...*

*I saw a real parallel there [between my mom and I], because I never discussed it with John either. I went back -- because what was I going to do? I was sixteen years old. I had grade ten education and no money. And I had to. So I had no choice. We're talking thirty some years ago, things weren't that easy ... And when I think about it, John was very, very much like my father -- very cold, very calculating, very black and white. So I guess you stay with what you're familiar with (Dina, p. 45-47).*

It seems natural that we are drawn to what we know and what we have lived, and so it is not surprising that Dina moved into such a similar story to that of her mother's -- even though her hope was to abandon her old childhood story. Looking for refuge within such a story, and then sticking it out in such a story, likely seemed the thing to do especially when she could not secure a sense of refuge or support from the parental characters in her home-life story.

But as the months and years passed, the oppressive parallels between her mother's situation and Dina's became more and more apparent. Dina's longing for a sense of connectedness amidst the isolation she was nested within, brought about a decision to adopt a baby. When she finally secured John's approval, they applied for adoption, and eventually were accepted. An unborn baby was specified as theirs and, as the months before this child's birth were counted down, Dina set to work preparing a nursery in their apartment suite. The room was arranged, crib and all, as Dina anticipated the arrival of her longed for child. And that is when it happened:



*Everything for the baby was ready and I got a phone call at work from John, 'I've got bad news, the adoption has been canceled.' When I came home, that's when I found out -- HE canceled the adoption! Just no discussion -- the control. Again there's a pattern of the controlling and, 'this is the way it is.' So he canceled the adoption. And that was such a horrible time for me -- to face my friends, and my family, and the loss of my child because that child was mine. That's like a miscarriage, or as my mother, a still-born. But there is a parallel, 'We're not going to talk about this, this is what's happened -- and that's it' (Dina, p. 49).*

Life for Dina in the years to come was a constant struggle to make sense of the oppressive marital story within which she was caught. The self-story she lived during these years with John continued to parallel her mother's self-story. On a daily basis, Dina's sense of self was housed within John's own self-serving agenda. Dina's belief about who she was came to be falsely influenced by the oppressive tale John forced upon her. Within this distorted and disempowering scenario, Dina spent years accepting her self-story as one deserving of blame, criticism, and powerlessness:

*[A few years later] when we applied [to adopt again], we had to prove that we couldn't have a child. I had been told that I couldn't have a child, and this was always sort of rubbed in by John and his mother. So, I always felt that inadequacy. Then when we had the test done, we found out that John had a low sperm count, so the problem wasn't me. It was his. The doctor put him on some medication to improve his sperm count and his sperm count improved ...*

*One day while I was standing in the bath, getting ready to go out, he came home ... and anyway he stood there, and he took those pills the doctor had gave him, and he flushed them down the toilet right in front of me. And not a word. What he was saying in actions was very, very unfair. So much coldness there -- he flushed my dreams down the toilet with those pills. That's what he did. Such a cruel, cruel thing to do. But he was a very cruel person (Dina, p. 51).*

Dina truly lived by the road most traveled during her years with John, after all, it was the road she had seen her mother travel before her. But it would not be long before she realized this well-worn road was really going nowhere.



## Chapter Four

### Realizing “I Just Couldn’t Take It Anymore”:

#### Waking Up To The Oppression Of Living Within A Non-Sensical Story

This budding pioneer was quickly growing weary of living life by the road most traveled. She soon realized that this well-worn road, was proving to be an endless stretch, with no sign ahead of the refuge she had initially hoped to find. As this awareness became clearer, Dina decided that this oppressive story was not going to live her much longer.

\* \* \*

A few years after John cancelled the first adoption, Dina again expressed her desire for a child. After some convincing, John agreed to apply a second time. There was a one-year probationary period, whereby the adoption could not be finalized until the end of the first year with the child. And so it was that this next scenario woke Dina up to the detour she desperately needed to make in her life, if she was to ever create who she wanted to become in her unfolding life-story:

*It was two or three years later when we applied for the adoption again and that's when we adopted Chad. I believe we had Chad less than six months because it was a one-year probationary period at that time. I came home -- John was baby-sitting him -- and that's when he announced that he wanted to give Chad back to the adoption agency! And I said, 'No, if he did, I was gone'. I really didn't care. I had nothing to live for, I had nothing if I was forced to give Chad back. So then he dropped it and the adoption went through.*

*But then he announced that his parents were taking Chad. John just didn't want him. Period. He had no room for him -- none. It was just, 'My parents are taking him. No discussion. This is the way it is.' And I said, 'I don't think so.'*

*And I guess that's when I knew that everything was over. I just could not continue on like that. I mean the manipulation right behind my back,*



*arranging things, arranging to give our child away! Where's the love when somebody can say, 'This is what's going to happen!?'.*

*I just couldn't tolerate that situation anymore. It was just one of those situations that makes you go crazy. It's like it doesn't make sense. Everything on the surface looks okay, and yet if you look under the surface, it was -- it's havoc. And that's how my life was.*

*But I just couldn't take it anymore. I just left. And of course I had a real hard time financially, and then I gave Chad to John's parents for a little while because I didn't have any money. I found a job and shared a bachelor apartment with my sister. Then John asked me to sign papers to give him custody of Chad, like I would! And I said, 'No, you said you'd help me out until I could get settled.' And he said, 'No. If you're not going to sign the papers, you can come get him today.' And I did (Dina, p. 49-51).*

But leaving this oppressive marriage meant edging away from a common road into the unknown. After all, she had been living her life by a script that was vaguely familiar up to this point. But to truly leave behind this old story of who she was would mean improvising a new story of who she wanted to become. And this was scary, especially when Dina recognized that authoring a desired story of who she wanted to become would be a process she would essentially need to take up on her own. She knew there would be very little support from those around her, which proved to be correct, as Dina explained, "It certainly was against my parents wishes that I divorced and when I did my father didn't have much to do with me for a while" (Dina, p. 75).

Despite the resounding force of the non-sensical story around her, Dina did not allow her self to be pressured into staying embedded within this old story. Instead, she pushed on with her decision to divorce, in hopes of constructing a new more satisfying story of her self. But as Dina was soon to discover, leaving an old story behind was often difficult -- and creating a new story, when she did not have a script or a map to guide her, could prove to be just as challenging.







## Chapter Five

### Edging Away From the Road Most Traveled... But Running Into a Switch-Back:

#### *A Similar Story With a Different Character*

For pioneers, edging away from the road most traveled was often a slow going and challenging process. Once the decision had been made to veer away from the discontentment they experienced in the common land, it often seemed that they traded one set of hardships for another. Turning off of a well-known path, in order to travel into the unknown, often brought about disorienting considerations. Where to go? Which direction would be safe? Which direction would be most desirable? What resources will be necessary in making the journey? Can this be done? Attempts to navigate through such unknown territory often made zigzagging routes and circling switch-backs an inevitable part of the pioneering journey ...

\*       \*       \*

Without a map to guide her, Dina veered away from her marriage with John, in search of a more satisfying and empowering sense of self. She hoped to re-discover a sense of the comforting "haven" and strengthening "rock" her childhood self had experienced while with her grandparents. And so, with vast unexplored territory ahead of her, Dina chose a direction and hoped for the best.

During one of our conversations, I asked Dina what moved her into her next relationship with William, whom she eventually married. Her answer was, "The love" (Dina, p. 76):

*I had experienced the most wonderful love with William. We had bought this little house, it was 650 square feet, that's two bedrooms, bathroom, and kitchen. And we had another child. We did so much together, we'd go camping, and on trips together, and it was such a wonderful, wonderful time. He'd even phone me from work, 'How are you doing? I was just thinking about you' (Dina, p. 54).*



*I knew William from before ... he wasn't a stranger to me and I had always really admired him and enjoyed him so to become involved with him was wonderful. It was great. Things couldn't have been better ... It brought me a great deal of peace and happiness. He showed me love, he showed me happiness, he showed me friendship ... (Dina, p. 76).*

*[William] was just a joy, he was just one of my biggest blessings in my life -- he was so unique and so different and so lovely, so much fun, so warm, so incredibly beautiful. He was so incredibly beautiful. The years I had with William were just ... everything in life you could ever hope for, the kindness, the loving, the fun ... the friend, we were friends. So how did it end? Well -- that nearly drove me crazy ... (Dina, p. 52).*

It was a few years into the marriage with William, when Dina was confronted with the disappointing and confusing realization that she had traveled down a circling switch-back, rather than securing what she thought was a more steady and empowering path forward. When the marriage with William began to reveal some disappointing truths, Dina once again resorted to the familiar Denial coping strategy, borrowed from the childhood story of Denial that was so familiar to her. But this old storyline could disguise the non-sensical truth for only so long. One evening while at a party, the confusing reality of the situation broke through. Dina could no longer deny the reality that William was engaging in marital infidelities:

*How do you interpret something that I thought was so incredible, how do you turn that around and make any sense of that situation of happiness? Because I truly thought William loved me, I know I loved him ... We were together 10 years ... [and then while at this party] -- there was the answer. That's what's been happening here! And it's unbelievable when you think about it ... I kept wondering, 'Why did he start drinking? ... Why did he start fooling around?' It doesn't make sense. It just doesn't make sense ...*

*Our lives were just too confusing, over the fact that there were transmittable diseases, and everybody calling him, and the drinking was becoming a very serious problem, a very serious problem ... And I was getting all these female problems and the doctor said to me, 'Dina, you have to really be careful with your sexual partners.' And when I said, 'I'm only having sex with my husband.' He said, 'Well then, your husband is obviously getting them from somebody else' ...*



*He was also trying to have an affair with my sister ... and it was my father who told me ... and my girlfriends tried to tell me that William was having an affair and I didn't believe them. Then [my sister] told me. And I didn't believe her and then my father said, 'You know Dina, it's true, because I was there' ... It was the ultimate of betrayals, my own sister (Dina, p. 52-54).*

Combined with his heavy drinking, Dina was awakened to yet another decision she would need to make in order to facilitate the creation of a preferred self-story. It was becoming apparent that creating an empowered and satisfying story of self, while involved with William, would be nearly impossible:

*William was really drinking heavy and there were so many nights ... we had a bedroom window that overlooked the street and the window was quite high so I would stand there. I think that window sill was worn out because I stood there at that window and waited and waited for him to come home. Always waiting -- and he would come home so drunk. And then we started having problems with Chad and the school counsellor recommended some family counselling, and the counsellor said, 'There's nothing wrong with your child. There's something wrong between you two.' So we started to go for counselling and William did come for a while and then he stopped and I continued on. And I remember [the counsellor] saying to me, 'If you love William, you won't take him back' (Dina, p. 77-78).*

Dina made the difficult decision to divorce William. The non-sensical nature of their relationship had become too non-sensical. Although she had not composed an alternative story for her self yet, with sadness she realized that this disempowering story was not one she wanted to continue living and telling about her self (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). Despite this awakening, leaving this marital-story was still so very difficult, as Dina stated, since being with William, "ran the whole gamut ... it was the best and the worst" (Dina, p. 52):

*Like I said before, William was the most important person to me in my life ... I thought I was being blessed and my life had turned for the better...I had envisions of the rest of my life with him and so when that dissipated, well, that made me really question, was God playing this awful trick on me? Did I*



*deserve to have a good life? Why was the carpet pulled out from under me? (Dina, p. 72)*

*I was devastated when I lost William. It was like my world was over. Here I had experienced the most wonderful love ... he showed me love, he taught me how to love, he helped me to grow, he took a seed and he planted it, and he watered it, and he cared for it, and he put sunshine on it, and it grew into this most beautiful woman...sunshine, this sunflower -- and then as far as I was concerned, he cut it. And I was devastated (Dina, p. 54).*

As Dina alluded above, she pursued a relationship with William because doing so seemed to initially nurture and strengthen her uncertain story of self. Yet again, Dina seemed to have taken up a search for someone to provide her with a more desirable story of self, rather than taking hold of the authorship process for her self. But not all was a loss -- there were new realizations that she was able to salvage and claim from this experience, however disappointing. Even though her relationship with William eventually brought her around in a confusing circle, the initial experience helped her realize that a new story of her self could include a capacity to openly love and be loved:

*I gained a lot from that relationship, I lost a lot too. But I did gain a lot, not just the children, but I think that the bond and the love, in that part of my life, it had ... a traumatic effect and I grew a tremendous amount. So to go on from there ... I'd say I found out who Dina was. I found out that I was a good person and that I could love, I could care, I could have fun, that I could be free. All of the things that you should learn as a child, I learned in my thirties with William.*

Although this chosen route had a disappointing ending, in hindsight, Dina's story of her self was strengthened through the personal realizations she took from the relationship. What was done was done. Now all she could do was take away the good as she shifted away from the bad. As embittering as it was for her to discover that she had yet again bumped into an old disempowering story, at least in hindsight she could view this encounter as one which helped foster her confidence and fortitude







-- which would be vital qualities as she attempted to navigate through the formidable wilderness trek ahead.



## Chapter Six

### Travels Through the Wilderness, "Where Ever The Wind Just Carried Me":

#### Living Life Without a Script

Dark days spent trekking through unmapped wilderness was an inevitable adversity for most pioneers. However distressing, they pushed on through the wilderness with hopes that it would not stretch on infinitely. They also carried hopes that this difficult wilderness trek would bring them closer to fertile land where they could nurture and develop the soil, or strengthening "rock" they so longingly craved. But these were dark days for the pioneer. For these were days marred by ongoing toils and calamities, the severity of which was usually known in full to the lone pioneer.

\*       \*       \*

After leaving William, Dina truly was a lone pioneer in uncharted territory. She was not only the first woman in her family to divorce, but now she was the first to have divorced twice. As well, never before had a woman in her family managed the difficult trek of single motherhood by themselves. No map or script existed which she could borrow from this time. At least not one that appealed to her. Scared, confused, and unsure of what to do or where to go -- Dina's trek through the wilderness years began. She described this trek as:

*... Taking a new step in my life, and hoping, and praying, and going in a direction, almost like where ever the wind just carried me ... not knowing ... (Dina, p. 71).*

Carried, as if by the wind, Dina's experience in this unknown territory was a confusing and overwhelming period for her as she struggled to make sense of the seemingly directionless and storyless realm she had entered:



*When [the marriage] dissolved, it was like my whole world was upside-down, I had no idea how to function. Talk about non-sensical ... (Dina, p. 77).*

*How do you sort something like that out? To me that was a craziness that I was dealing with and it took me many years to sort that out ... (Dina, p. 52).*

*I didn't know how I could go on and that part of my life really is a blur, it's an absolute blur, it's just like from this year to this year I have no memory ... (Dina, p. 55).*

As Dina pushed on from her marriage with William, she felt great fear and confusion -- she was now on her own in what must have felt like a scriptless play. By abandoning the old stories she had lived her life by, Dina moved her self into a yet unwritten and unmapped story-void. It was while Dina was immersed within this seemingly directionless and storyless void, that she was jolted awakened by a shocking realization, which spurred her to take action and consciously decide what kind of story she wanted to author for her self...



## Chapter Seven

### Realizing “Something Had To Be Done”:

#### Waking Up To The Pain Of Living Within A Disempowering Story

A crucial awakening occurred when Dina made a horrific discovery about her twelve year old son. Young Chad had been badly burned while tramping out a campfire at his father's acreage. Gas had gotten onto his pants earlier in the day, and when he attempted to trample out some flames, he caught on fire instantly. As a result, he spent many weeks in the hospital recovering from major reconstructive surgery on his legs.

The afternoon Chad was to be released from hospital Dina received a phone call from him. He told her, Michael, a co-worker she was friends with, had stopped by the hospital and offered to drive him home. Over the course of Chad's lengthy hospital stay, Michael had visited Chad numerous times to keep him company. As a single parent, Dina felt supported by her friend's interest in her family. When Dina received Chad's phone call, she was at home busily preparing a 'Welcome Home' party for him, so she gave Chad permission to drive home with Michael.

Later that evening, after the party was over, Dina had a night class to attend. She thought about skipping the class in order to stay home with Chad, but then Michael offered to look after her tired son while she was gone. It was difficult for her as a single mother, and so she appreciated the assistance -- and went to her class:

*That was a horrible, horrible time in my life with the realization of what had happened with Chad, what he had gone through ... Michael brought him home from the hospital and we had the little party, Chad was very tired because he had had major surgery - reconstructive surgery ... on both of his legs. The legs were very badly burned from the ankle up into the knee, and it took the bone, the tissue, the muscle, everything ... so it was an intense fire.*





*I had enrolled in a night course and that's when Michael suggested that he could baby-sit for me. And so I went to the course ... a couple of times. But when Chad was ... out to his dad's [a couple months later], I was vacuuming and I had a floor lamp in his room and I picked up the lamp to vacuum underneath it and I found the note -- this little piece of paper all folded up. I figured Chad had failed something ... So I picked up the paper expecting to find that Chad had failed a test and hidden it, only to find that note [addressed to Michael] -- and twice in the note, 'Don't tell my mom. Don't tell my mom!' (Dina, p. 72-73).*

This distressing note placed Dina at a critical crossroads on her wilderness journey. It was a window in time. A window which could either be viewed as an opportunity to speak out and author a more empowered story of self -- or a window which could be dismissed, as she fell back upon the same old Denial story her mother chose to live her life by. It was truly a definitive pause on her wilderness trek -- a pause that would give shape to the form and direction her unfolding self-story would eventually take.

Thankfully, Dina recognized that at this cross-road there did exist an invitation, albeit a challenging one. The invitation before Dina was an offer to consciously choose, and then actively author, a preferred version of her story of self, rather than remaining passive and inactive within the old familiar Denial plotline:

*The first thing I did was I took the note, and I crushed it up, and I threw it in the garbage, like the instance never happened ... after reading it.*

*The thoughts in my mind just kept going over, and over, and over again. I was getting so angry thinking about what had likely occurred. Then I realized I was doing the same thing to my son that my mother had done to me. I didn't feel responsible, because nobody at that time knew that Michael was a pedophile, nobody knew that. None of us that knew him ... but he was a known pedophile, he was known, but nobody had laid charges against him.*

*So I laid the charges, then things came to light. He definitely was going to do jail time and he quit work. I phoned the police after I found the note and I phoned the sex abuse line and ... I just realized that I couldn't destroy my child the way my mother had destroyed my life.*



*I definitely didn't want to repeat what my mother did. That has been a major in my life and has ruined my life. It was two wrongs -- the wrong of being sexually abused for years and then a second wrong, which is probably even more fatal, of going to my mother and telling my mother -- and it still continuing. She allowed it to happen -- like I wasn't good enough. She didn't care, she didn't protect me. How could a mother do that?*

*And I just felt so, so sick -- to think that I had the same exact thought of my mother, and then I thought, 'No, no, no! I can't do this, I can't let my child suffer in life the way I have.' Something needed to be done. So I decided to report it and I called the police the next day. Then I phoned William and told him (Dina, p. 73-74).*

For Dina, considerable courage and resolve was involved in consciously and actively asserting a more empowered version of the many possible ways this story could have unfolded. It was an extremely difficult but extremely important challenge, which offered her an opportunity to break away from the “directionless ... going where the wind just carried me ... not knowing” nature of her hither to storied life (Dina, p. 71). It was a difficult challenge for many reasons. Difficult because of the non-sensical betrayal and suffering which was forced upon her family. Difficult because of the unimaginable outcome which developed after reporting the crime. And difficult because people around her attempted to persuade and shame her into falling back upon the old disempowering Denial family story:

*It was so hurtful because Michael was a friend of mine. I worked with Michael for years. I worked with him! We went out for lunch two or three days a week. We had fun. I was never romantically involved with him certainly, but I thought he was a friend, I thought he cared, I felt very, very betrayed. Very betrayed.*

*His parents didn't even know anything about it. His parents knew nothing. He quit work and his parents didn't even know he wasn't coming into work. His mother packed his lunch every day and he came into work. I can still remember when the police phoned me and said they had laid charges -- he had admitted it. I remember when Michael was at work and he came up to my desk and said, 'The police want me to come down and talk to them, do you know anything about this?'. And I nodded.*



*Then they laid charges and he went to a court appearance and was released. Then I remember getting a phone call from the RCMP saying, 'I just want to let you know that the case is closed in regards to your son.' I said, 'How can the case be closed when I laid the charges?'. And he chose his words very carefully, and the next thing he said was, 'Well, because Michael is deceased.' And I found it very hard to imagine!*

*He had gone out on his parent's property and committed suicide in the garage ... how could you do that to your parents? When the RCMP officer told me that Michael was dead I started to cry, and he said, 'Well, I must say -- it's a very unusual reaction that you're crying.' And I said, 'Well, I'm very torn because I knew him not only -- it was a new thing that I knew him as my son's abuser -- but I also knew him as a friend for many years from before that.' So there was a loss of many things there.*

*Of course my boss blamed my son ... he said, 'Well it probably didn't happen.' And I said, 'If it probably didn't happen, then why were charges laid? Why did Michael admit to it? He admitted to it!'. The RCMP said he was a known pedophile, who followed the same scenario, he would find a single mother, and go after the boy. But nobody had laid charges until me (Dina, p. 74-75).*

As disturbing as this story was, for all persons involved, it seemed that it was the process of working through this unfortunate crisis, which provided Dina with a sense of purpose from which she could begin consciously and actively authoring her preferred and more empowered version of self. The shock of this crisis seemed to clear the wilderness fog from Dina's path. She was challenged to decide which storyline she wanted to live her life by. Consciousness and reflection gave way to clarity and her decision to take assertive action, and by doing so, Dina seemed to realize that she could indeed initiate action illustrative of a woman living by an "I am a powerful woman" story.

By dealing so courageously with this situation, Dina seemed to trigger her own process of living by, enriching, and authenticating the story of self she wanted to stand for. Despite how terribly shocking this situation was, this crisis proved to challenge Dina to assert and activate a more conscious, purposeful, and empowered





storyline into the windblown "not knowing" nature of her vague wilderness trek (Dina, p. 71).

This situation proved to be just one, in a series of upcoming encounters, which would further reinforce and thicken Dina's realization that a comforting "haven" and strengthening "rock" was something she would need to consciously and actively create and authenticate within her own self-story, rather than locating this sense within the scenes of other individuals.

This empowering realization seeded itself -- and gradually grew. It did not crystallize over night. For re-constructing her sense of self was a complex and continually evolving process. It was not something to be entirely achieved in short time.

A third marriage was even pursued during this re-construction phase. But it was a marriage that Dina told me very little about. Her only comment was:

*It was such an awful relationship ... again, it was a long relationship because [my youngest child] was only four or five when we first met ... But he'd never been married before and of course to take up two children -- well, he wasn't really ready for it (Dina, p. 57).*

Likely this lack of dialogue in regards to her third marriage, quietly speaks to the lack of relevance this marriage had as a storyline that contributed to her process of re-writing and authenticating a more empowered self sense. Instead, Dina chose to tell me of the empowering storylines which contributed to the re-authoring of her self-story. For a trail through the wilderness continued to take shape for Dina, as she was also urged by others to give focus to the self-story she wanted to live her life by.

As Dina explained, when problems in her third marriage developed:

*My girlfriend said, 'You know Dina, I think it's pretty obvious that you've got some problems.' And that's when I joined Co-dependents Anonymous. And that really changed my life ... It was a real turning point in realizing the*





*depths of the negative road that I was taking in my life ... they showed me that I was just feeding the belief that I didn't deserve better and that I was ... taking crumbs when I deserved the banquet (Dina, p. 57).*

As Dina lived from a more conscious and purposeful stance, with regard to creating who it was she wanted to become, she began to take active steps to figure her way out of the difficult wilderness years. She was committed to this process of re-authoring her self-story. Therefore Dina remained open to learning and authenticating experiences which empowered her to eventually forge her way through the dizzying dim of the non-sensical wilderness:

*After I went to Co-dependents Anonymous I took a course on sex abuse to see what I could come up with. That was really another turning point in my life. And that was an important step, a very important step for me. Those were two major decisions that really changed the course of my life ...*

*I had a beautiful, beautiful counsellor. She was such a darling. She really helped me ... she was such a joy and I can remember -- I think one of the major things in my life was, 'Why? Why did it happen? Why?'. That to me was important. Why it had happened. 'Why did he do that? Why did he say that? Why did this happen?' The reality was that it really didn't make any difference. My counsellor really helped me to understand that and to see that, 'Okay, it happened, now what are you going to do?'*

*That's where I had fed that real 'in the cage lifestyle', like the mouse on the wheel. That's exactly what I was -- just running as fast as I could, but staying in the same place. And I often think of that mouse -- I was just that crazy, crazy mouse on that wheel! (Dina, p. 58).*

*My counsellor ... encouraged me to go to university. She's the one who literally got me phone numbers and said, 'Why don't you phone these...why don't you do this?'. Next time, 'Did you give her a call...? No? Well Dina, let's take it from here. What would be the worst thing that could happen if you did? Okay, what would be the best thing if you did this? And I know it's scary...'*

*You know, she was just a real 'hands-on', she was a very, very wonderful counsellor for me because it was like, 'Let's break it down, and let's take this piece of your life right here, and in all of this chaos, let's take this one little bit here and we'll put it aside, and we'll work on it. And maybe you can't do that this week, but think about it ... just think about it.' And as I'd go, there would*



*always be that encouragement. Always the encouragement. 'Well, you thought about it, didn't you? So maybe you can make that phone call tomorrow or maybe you might even go home today and make that phone call.'*

*That really was what I needed because as a child if you've been encouraged to develop inner strengths and given that inner wisdom, you have something to build on. But when you have gone through life, sort of 'hither and thither', where it's been more of a disaster, you don't really have that. And so I discovered ... inner strength, that I am okay, that those things happen in life, and whether they should have happened doesn't make any difference -- they did. 'So what are you going to do now? What do you see for yourself now? How can we help you now?' (Dina, p. 64-65)*

*She was a big help ... And it was such a relief, such a relief, to finally get off that bloody wheel and get going! (Dina, p. 59).*

With her counsellor's encouragement, the two of them collaborated together in the continued co-creation of a more empowering sense of direction and purpose within the story of Dina's self. In many ways, it was Dina's challenging trek through the wilderness years, which gradually helped her realize that incorporating a comforting "haven" and strengthening "rock" within her story of self, needed to be personally constructed -- rather than offered up by others. It seemed to be the challenges faced during the wilderness years that awoke her consciousness to the enriching storyline she preferred to authentically live and tell about her self. Empowered with this realization, that it was up to her to author and edit the next chapter of her self-story, she stepped off of "the wheel" and away from the dim and daunting wilderness.



## Chapter Eight

### Forging New Territory “Using Everything That I’ve Got”:

#### Constructing A More Empowering Story Of Her Self

One of the most exciting pieces of a pioneer story, takes place as the pioneer pulls away from the dim of the wilderness -- and catches their first glimpse of the fertile frontier ahead. It is at this point that the pioneer plotline really takes off, as the pioneer, renewed of spirit and courage, goes to work in the creation of a comforting "haven" and strengthening "rock" from the unturned earth before them. With very few tangible supplies on hand to assist, these brave spirits improvised and constructed their satisfying "haven" from the resources at hand. They accepted the reality that they were now in a realm without accessible materials to rely upon. And so they looked around -- and resourcefully infused innovative possibilities into the comforting "haven" and strengthening "rock" they set out to create ...

\* \* \*

Dina's spirit and courage was also renewed as she pulled away from the constraints of the wilderness. Realizing that she was ultimately capable of, and responsible for, re-constructing and creating a more empowering story of her self -- she too set to work. Like the old time pioneers before her, Dina accepted that she was now on her own in a frontier land. She also accepted that she did not have any immediately appealing life-story scripts to fall back upon. And so, like the many pioneers before her, Dina looked around, examined the possibilities -- and then consciously set to work in the creation and authentication of a more empowered story of her self.

Dina was very familiar with the disempowering stories she had, for the most part, grown up around. By now she was also consciously aware that she did not want to fall back upon these oppressive story scripts as she re-invented her story of self.



As well, she realized that up to this time, she had spent much of her life in search of a renewed sense of the comforting "haven" and strengthening "rock" she experienced while growing up with her maternal grandparents. However, Dina was becoming increasingly aware that

composing and authenticating this kind of self-story was an undertaking which ultimately needed to be created by her, rather than located in the people around her. She realized that her longing for a nurtured and strengthened sense of self could only be satisfied by taking her own active steps towards re-authoring a more empowered version of her self. Which is exactly what she did.

Most stories seem to be composed from a handful of varied plotlines which exist in the world around us, whether in the form of stories as told, stories as written, or stories as lived. These plotlines seem to surface repeatedly in re-worked forms loosely based on storied accounts that have experienced previous tellings in history. And so as Dina prepared to move forward in purposefully re-authoring a new version of her self, she too became interested in the other possible plotlines that existed in the world around her. It was during this time that her passionate curiosity for alternative plotlines seemed to be awakened, as she happened upon a long silenced ancestral storyline which seemed to breathe new inspiration and possibilities into her preferred notion of self.

*My sister phoned me and said, 'We'd like to get Granny's birth certificate.' And I said, "Well, okay I'll go and try." But we couldn't find it. We just couldn't find it ... so I started to phone around to different places and I phoned the museum and I talked to a man who said, 'You know, there's a family tree here that is Callihoo.' And of course I was thrilled to hear this and he said, 'Well, I'm going to put it aside and come down on Saturday.'*

*And when I was looking through it my [maternal] grandmother's name was different on the family tree so we didn't get the connection ... but my grandmother was registered under a different name because of the convent. They were given new names in the convent. But I happened to recognize my mother's cousin's name and that's how I realized that's who she was, because I*







*knew of her age. Then I was able to go back from there and get her birth certificate from the Alberta registry.*

*I wasn't supposed to be able to get a copy of the original but they brought a book out and he said, 'I could turn my back if you want to go and photocopy it'. So she was 112th on the official Alberta registry, registered in 1894! So it was pretty unique and very exciting for me to see that!*

*... I just sat there and cried. It was just so thrilling to think, 'This is my grandmother!' ... But when I found my grandmother's birth certificate -- that was the key -- and it just opened up my life. That point changed my life ... my feet never touched the ground, to think that I had come across such a wonderful woman like her (Dina, p. 1-2).*

Discovering this birth certificate introduced Dina to the prior to silenced story of her maternal grandmother's life. She was inspired by her grandmother's rich and meaningful heritage. It was this discovery of her grandmother's birth certificate, and life-story, which seemed to "open up" space for the re-construction of her new more empowering story of self (Dina, p. 1). For as much as the challenging wilderness years had supplied Dina with a conscious vision of a purposeful future, this ancestral discovery provided her with the foundation upon which such a future could be conceived. Never before had Dina considered her maternal lineage in this manner, after all, the life-stories she had observed her mother and grandmother live by were non-descript when it came to their heritage and history.

Inspired, Dina set to work, turning her attention to the alternative ancestral life-stories which could empower and mentor her as she engaged in a re-authoring of her story of self. That is, she began to explore quieted ancestral family stories, in order to connect with more empowering story scripts she could borrow inspiration from, and integrate, into her own strengthened re-vision of self.

As Dina dug deeper into the genealogical records, she was further amazed to discover the extent of the adventuresome and unconquerable pioneering spirit which quietly existed within her maternal life-story roots:



*Then I found out that my great-grandfather was the person who started the Callihoo reserve. Michel Callihoo, that was my grandmother's father! ... You see, my grandmother was the 24th child, she was Michel's youngest, from his second wife (Dina, p. 1).*

*I went down [to the museum] to see this great big family tree ... this tree was probably two feet by three feet -- and it's got the history. It comes from [Michel's father, Louis Kwarakwante, whose name was later changed to Callihoo] when he left Kahnawake, Quebec ... just outside of Montreal [sometime around 1800] ...*

*[The family tree] goes back to 1650 ... my great-great-grandfather [Louis] originally started in Kahnawake. He left with three other men and came west. And [the genealogy information] tells of their tales and a little bit of their adventure ... and [the family tree] shows where Michel came from in history and then it comes down and it shows who he married and how he had twelve children. And then his first wife died and then he married Philomene, who was my great-grandmother, and they had twelve children. And my grandmother was the last child. So he had twenty-four children in all and my grandmother was his last child (Dina, p. 2).*

During our research conversations, Dina showed me the binder full of genealogical documents she had collected on her Iroquois-Cree ancestors. This binder contained copies of birth certificates, newspaper clippings on the Callihoo family, photocopies from history textbooks on the Iroquois Callihoo, and written genealogical documents done by the Red Cross in the 1950's when the Callihoo's rare blood type was investigated. I had asked Dina if there were any 'memory pieces' that would help reflect how she came to make sense of who she is. Her binder full of genealogical information was subsequently produced.

I have included a few poignant life-story excerpts Dina came across, as she cleared the dust from the archival material, and first encountered her hitherto silenced family stories. These are powerful tellings of perseverance, courage, and unconquerable faith, in the face of ongoing hardships. Imagine the potency of discovering such inspiring and courageous life-stories. Then imagine the potency, for



Dina, of discovering that her own life-story flowed forth from these stories of determination, spirit, and accomplishment.

We sat together in my living room, as Dina proudly shared her precious ancestral story discoveries -- which have come to inform her own self-story. Here is how she introduced me to the way in which she gathered the lineage of her ancestors' life-stories:

*This is my research that I did for the reserve, for the Callihoo reserve ... It really just blows my mind to think that this is Michel's (her great-grandfather's) writing and to think of the different things that he has done! I mean I could have spent hundreds of dollars going through the library photocopying all of this stuff. I'm hoping to get through some of this stuff and get a great deal more ...*

*Father Tardash, the one who did our family tree, was doing it because of the blood. There's a very rare blood line in the Callihoo. So he had sent out all these invitations for people to write down their lineage and to send it in. And these (showing me pieces of paper) are photocopies of the actual things that people sent in. Some of it was on a napkin! And one was even on a paper placemat from a restaurant! And the writing in here, it was just unbelievable. So it was very, very interesting to go through the stuff (Dina, p. 19 & 21).*

Dina's great-great-grandfather was Louis Kwarakwante (later changed to Callihoo). Here are some of the archival stories she discovered from his unfolding legacy:

*Louis Kwarakwante ... was born at Kahnawake on October 17, 1782 ... he was called Karehiio, "Fine Forest". He left for the west [sometime between 1799-1810]. He was accompanied by two friends [other sources state one of these men was actually his brother]. What adventures must have awaited these three young men as they left their homes for the long paddle west? They were born at a difficult time for the [Kanienkehaka-Iroquois]. Their lands were being stolen. Their language and culture was under attack. And their means of making a living had been drastically changed. It must have been some slight sense of hesitation, as well as fear, that these three voyageurs experienced when they pushed off from the Lachine wharf in the direction west ...*





*In 1821 the Northwest Company and the Hudson's Bay Company joined together in one company. Most of the Kanienkehaka-Iroquois who had worked for the Northwest Company now went to work for the Hudson's Bay Company as trappers and voyageurs ... The Hudson's Bay Company was anxious to hire [Kanienkehaka-Iroquois] men. [The company's] reasons for wanting to hire [them] are evident in letters [such as this one from] the Hudson's Bay Company [agents]:*

*The wind blew pretty fresh when I reached the Big Point, but the swell was by no means high, still my Iroquois seemed reluctant to attempt the traverse. Yet, the whoop was immediately given and in a moment the canoe was in the water. All went well, until we came to the opening of the bay on the right where a very heavy sea was running, here we began to ship water, when the guide ordered the steersman to be changed, and the bowsman moved to the second bar which lightened the canoe by the head. This measure was of the utmost importance.*

*A small oil cloth was then handed to the men in front, who threw it over the head of the canoe when danger was apprehended from the breaking of the sea. The silence that prevailed when one of those heavy swells was seen rolling upon us was truly appalling, the paddles were embarked and all watched its approach with perfect composure.*

*Our new steersman with the utmost dexterity kept plying our slender bark, by placing her in the best position of defense. The moment it passed every paddle was in the water, and every nerve stretched to gain the land. In this manner we made a small island sheltered by a reef or rocks, but in doubling this point our canoe nearly filled, and although two men were constantly employed in bailing out the water, fifty yards more would have swamped us.*

*I have frequently heard the Canadian and Iroquois voyageurs disputed as regards their merits, perhaps the former may be more hardy or undergo more fatigue, but in either a rapid or a traverse, give me the latter, for their calmness and presence of mind which never forsakes them in the greatest danger (p. 288-290, genealogical source unknown).*

And from another genealogical source:





*The hardy, adventurous voyageurs and coureurs-des-bois played a major role in this trade and exploration for it was they who stroked the oars of the canoes up and down the rivers, hunted the food, and portaged the rapids.*

*On one of these trips, sometime around 1810, three Iroquois Indians accompanied the boatmen ... [one of them was] Louis Kwarakwante from the Iroquois village ... nine miles east of Montreal ... This particular journey followed the customary water route from Montreal to Fort Garry (Winnipeg) where they ... traveled even further north and west, an area where few white men had ventured before. They continued by way of Cumberland House, up the Churchill River to the Beaver River to Lac La Biche. From here they portaged to the forest of the Athabasca.*

*It was in the Athabasca region that the three Iroquois took wives of the Sekanaisé tribe ... [Years later] a small group under the leadership of Louis remained in the isolated area of the Rocky Mountains ... It was this small group that Pere de Smet met in 1846 and recorded in his journal:*

*On the shores of the Jasper, we met an old Iroquois, Louis Kwarakwante, accompanied by his family comprised of 36 persons. He had been away from his country for 40 years; he had never seen a priest during that time. He was staying in the forest of Athabasca on the Peace River and lived by hunting and fishing. The good old man was overcome with joy and so were his children.*

*When the mission at Lac Ste. Anne was established in 1843 ... Father Lacombe later convinced [Louis's band of family] to move to his newly formed mission at St. Albert ... Father Lacombe renamed this branch of Kaniienkhehaka ... 'Cailloux' (the rock) to differentiate them from other branches. It is speculated that this name was a reference to the many trips the Iroquois had taken through the Rocky Mountains. This has since been corrupted to Callihoo ...*

*One of Louis's sons, Michel [Callihoo], worked as a river boat pilot for the H.B.C. from Athabasca to Fort Garry via Edmonton. At the end of the fur trade era he and his family camped around the mission at St. Albert. Through the mediation of Father Lacombe, Michel and his band was given the Indian Reserve west of St. Albert ... which was to bear his name until it was given up in the 1950's (p. 7-9, *Meet Our Pioneers: The Callihoo's*. St. Albert Historical Society, June, 1981).*

As well, on a bronze plaque dedicated to Dina's great-uncle, Johnny Callihoo, located at the Edmonton Legislative buildings, it is stated that he:



*... devoted his life to the welfare of his people ... he brought Indians together as an active political force in the 1930's ... resulting in the forming of the Indian Association of Alberta ... he brought about many improvements in conditions on Indian reserves in health, education, and welfare services.*

These were just a few of the inspiring ancestral stories Dina encountered while searching for her grandmother's birth certificate. Keep in mind Dina grew up never hearing of her Native ancestry nor of her mother's extended family. And so, as I proposed earlier, one can surely imagine the sense of pride and empowerment that would have surged through Dina upon discovering these historic papers. Just as one can surely understand how these findings would have influenced her evolving sense of a stronger self:

*I can still remember that feeling of absolute pride in thinking back to what my forefathers had done. To me that was just so beautiful. You know, you read history books, but to know that this was my great-grandfather -- and to think about what he had accomplished in life! So that was a real joy to me ...*

*Oh! When I saw [my grandmother's birth certificate], the original, it thrilled me to think of the history -- how tied I am with Canada, with the west, with the Nateness. I mean it's just so intriguing because I love history and I love Alberta -- and my grandparents were the founders! I mean it is just unbelievable to me to think that they were here when there was nothing! (Dina, p. 1 & 3).*

I checked out with Dina my growing understanding that reclaiming these adventurous Kwarakwante/Callihoo/"The Rock" family stories helped her conceptualize a more empowered sense of who she was -- because she came to see the foundation of her own self-story rooted in these rich ancestral descriptions. She learned that their story of strength could also be a part of her unfolding self-story. Dina enthusiastically confirmed my impressions:



*Yes, yes -- because how can you separate them? When you look at a rock and you see all of the layers in a rock -- I mean it is the pieces that make the whole. You can't take away the pieces! And that's what I find for myself, I can't take away those pieces that are a part of me. And it's funny how I've always had this fascination with rocks. I can remember as a kid wondering down the road and looking at the different rocks. My house is filled with rocks! And when I found out that Father Lacombe named Michel, "Calihoo", because that was "The Rock"-- well, it's just little things like that seem to make sense (Dina, p. 15).*

When I was analyzing my typewritten transcript of this conversation with Dina, I scribbled in the margin next to this last quote: "Finally something that does make sense for her!" Dina's life-story had been plagued with oppressive and non-sensical situations. It seemed both comforting and fitting that the strengthening "Rock" she had longed to have within her self-sense would be re-claimed and integrated into her unfolding self-story through the empowering ancestral stories of her family known as "The Rock". These ancestral discoveries for Dina could be likened to the overturning of soil in the foundational construction of a pioneer's new home or "haven". Only for Dina, these ancestral discoveries were the inspiring and meaningful foundational threads she could, and would, weave into the empowering re-vision of her story of self.

With these inspiring life-stories to sustain her, and Dina's spirit renewed, she continued on in her commitment to forge a strengthened sense of self. It was only two weeks later that this next significant event presented itself -- and Dina embraced this opportunity with vigor. Although she was well on her way to re-authoring a more empowered story of her self, this pioneering process was an isolating experience at times. And so this next opportunity brought her into affirming contact with other modern day pioneers who were purposefully working to create a fuller and richer sense of their own foundational self-stories:

*It was probably about two weeks later when I got a phone call. It was from one of my mother's cousins. She said, 'I don't think you'd remember me but*





*I've just had a phone call from some French people. Now do you remember some French people from your grandmother's side?' I said, 'Of course I do! I've got the family tree here in front of me!'. And she said, 'Well you know, they are in town and they are really interested in meeting some of their relatives, would you come? We're going to meet tomorrow at Albert's restaurant.'*

*Well, I was just so thrilled! So I got everything together, my grandmother's birth certificate, her picture, and everything, and we went down there. And you know -- they looked just like my grandmother! It was just so amazing! You see, my grandmother's third older sister married a French man from Belgium, and he came here ... and then he married Corrine and they had four children here, then they moved to New York, and then they moved back to Belgium. And because she was Native she was rejected. So he said, 'To hell with you people!'. So they left and went to France ...*

*So these were the grandchildren, and they decided that they wanted to get in touch with where their parents were born. So they sent a letter to every single person and address they had. And they all came back saying 'Moved' or 'Address Unknown'. And they said it didn't matter to them -- they had an old map. You wouldn't believe this old map that they had of the Namaio and Legal area! And they knew where their father was born and they were determined that they were going to get some of that dirt and bring it back to France!*

*So as it happened, they came to Canada and had gone out there. And only the one girl had very, very little English. And they happened to drive up into a farm yard where the people weren't French people, they only spoke English, but a visitor visiting the farm was French! So this visitor was thrilled, meeting people from France. So she went through the phone book and phoned every single Callihoo and finally she came across Beatrice, and she was the one who said, 'Let's meet for coffee because they want to meet you.'*

*Well, of course that was it! We have been instant friends! And we have really corresponded a lot and they've been here to see us twice. And they just literally got down and kissed the ground -- to think that they had finally found the place where their grandmother lived and their parents were born! So they just loved it, they call themselves French Indians (laughing)! So they were really, really thrilled to finally find their end of the heritage.*

*So what happened was, that weekend they were here the Lac Ste. Anne pilgrimage was on. And so having hardly ever seen a Native individual -- we drove up to Lac Ste. Anne and they saw all of these brown faces and they were just (laughing) -- it was unbelievable to just watch them! They couldn't believe the cultural richness they were coming across (Dina, p. 2-3).*





Connecting with these long lost relations affirmed Dina's pioneer journey. By encountering others who were engaged in a similar process of enriching their sense of selves, Dina's own process was further affirmed. Through encountering and witnessing each other's storied lives, they were able to thicken and authenticate their self sense as they were strengthened and empowered by the foundational heritage which was quickly becoming an inseparable part of their identities. Just like the inseparable layers of a rock. When I asked Dina how this experience was important for her she explained:

*Very, very important -- because I think that on this side of the ocean it was happening for me, and it happened on the other side of the ocean where they went through the trunks and found all of the letters from here. Because their grandmother and my grandmother looked very much alike. They were sisters and they were from the same convent ...*

*But the people from France have been very meaningful. With that group it was just like from the moment we met we knew each other. We had a wonderful, wonderful time together ...*

*It brings you to a bond. Like my cousin looks identical to my uncle, who is my mother's brother. He looks identical to him. I look very, very much like my grandmother -- from pictures that he saw of his grandmother. And I can remember him not being able to speak a word of English -- and he took my face in his hands -- and that was just so important to him, it was that connection from the past. It was like history being re-made, bringing together those strong, strong bonds -- because my family was strong and connected at one time, and the convent broke that up, and then the disintegration of the reserve ...*

*It was like a blast from the past. You know, the connection -- to think of the long lost relative, like when Dr. Anne Anderson (a Cree Elder and relation of Dina's) went back to Kahnawake, that was the same thing there -- 'Oh, you're one of them, from [Louis Kwarakwante]!'. They knew that one of their group had left, and that they had never heard from him or seen him again. So there was something there that was important -- you know, it was the reconnecting that has been so important, so tremendously important. It's been wonderful. It's been a journey that I would never ever trade.*

*And when I look at myself now and where I've come ... it seems like the more I know the more I want to know. I'm still compelled to dig and to search -- and*



*with so many Natives it's like, 'Well, who was your mother?' And that's very, very Native -- 'Well, who are your roots?'. That's the connection -- and if we can find some way in the past that we were brothers or cousins or 'Well my cousin married so and so' -- 'Oh yah, well we're related!' -- well that's important! And that's sort of the way I feel ... that gives you that bond and it's important, it's very important (Dina, p. 10-13).*

Dina's re-construction of an empowering story of her self continued to flourish. She took hold of the nourishing inspiration she had re-claimed from her ancestral stories, as she continued to "dig and search" for further ancestral storylines to integrate into the empowering self-story she was weaving (p. 13). Each experience seemed to build upon, and flow from, the last.

While Dina and I sat under the shade of tall trees, at her grandparent's former acreage, she went on to share her stories and insights regarding this process:

*My grandparents left here in 1973, and so I never was back out here to this property until when the people from France came. They wanted to see where the letters were written from, so I brought them out here and I thought I would take a chance and come out here and [the owner] was so happy to let us come ... (Dina, p. 69-70).*

*Since finding my grandmother's birth certificate I have gone back out to the acreage, my grandmother's acreage, to just go out there and walk. And it's so different -- and yet it's still the same. The house is still there. The gentleman that bought the house had converted it into a barn, a horse barn -- and now he's reconverted it into a workshop.*

*But I went through it and he said, 'You might like to look at this.' And he moved something out of the way and -- all of the layers of the wallpaper -- there was probably about seven layers of wallpaper on there -- and the floods, the absolute floods of memory with each layer of wallpaper that came off!*

*I could remember the times of sitting there, because it was such a tiny little room, and there was a pot belly stove because of course they didn't have central heating then. And to sit there -- and Granny was very much the typical Elder -- the telling of almost like parables ... it's like you'd ask a question and think, 'I asked you a question, can't you just answer the question!'. And you'd get a story -- and I remember thinking as a child, 'I don't get it, what is she saying?'. And now I get it. But she was very, very much that way -- always, always stories -- "My girl, come here my girl." -- that was her favorite saying. And she would sit and talk.*



*And I look a lot like my grandmother. And know I can see the parallelisms in our lives -- the way we feel about certain things and the way we --. I know I have that calm -- I have the calm and the peace that my grandmother had and I also have an incredible amount of strength. I am a powerful woman. I wouldn't be where I am today if I hadn't found that inner strength and power ... (Dina, p. 8-9).*

*So I take that serenity from here, of coming back here ... it just feels like home. When my life was so destructive, I was never here ... maybe if I would have had this place, if I would have got that connectedness then -- I would have seen where I was going (Dina, 1998, p. 70).*

As Dina suggested, re-visiting her grandparents' memory-filled cabin re-connected her with the strength of these pioneering relations. She, in turn, borrowed from their strength and integrated it into the purposeful story she was composing for her present and future life. Dina's last comment above, seemed to directly reflect her understanding of the nurturing, strengthening, and healing nature of being connected with one's history.

Dina was at a point in her journey where she was able to gather and weave strength from many narrative threads -- from her ancestral storylines as well as from the challenging storylines she herself had already authored her way through. Dina seemed to gather insight and direction from these experiences. It was this growing sense of empowerment, through her connectedness with her ancestry and personal resiliency, which seemed to propel her even further forward in her self-story re-construction. She secured a sense of possibility and hope through her ancestral connections and, by doing so, she was empowered to seek out further connections -- so as to strengthen and authenticate her composition of self even further.

This was a process of looking backwards in order to reclaim other possible narratives of that could assist her in composing the future she desired. This process of going backwards in order to create a desired clarity in looking forward, enabled





Dina to 'map' the story of her self she wanted to live and tell through inspiration borrowed from ancestral storylines and experiences:

*I think the direction that my life has taken in the last little while, probably in the last ten years, is definitely from learning my heritage -- of learning the inner strength of the people that were there. I mean, they were pioneers, they were people who just went on no matter what diversity they came across, they just went on and they were adventurous. They had that sense that things could get better. To me that's where I got my inner strength from.*

*I don't imagine I'll ever leave Edmonton ... but I think I have been very adventurous in my life ... I am much stronger today than I have ever been -- but searching, searching through those things (genealogical information) and searching through my life -- when I look at those pictures [of my ancestors] those people had nothing. And yet they had an incredible amount of love and joy (Dina, p. 26-27).*

While continuing to assist her French relatives with their own life-story re-construction, Dina encountered another empowering character and another piece for her own remarkable life-story script. This character was Cree Elder, author, and teacher, Dr. Anne Anderson (interestingly Dina also discovered they were related). This inspiring Elder and her life-story again offered Dina an empowering storyline she was strengthened by, as she re-shaped the direction of her own unfolding self-story:

*... Another thing was my relationship with Dr. Anne. I think Dr. Anne made the biggest impact of a change in the direction of my life because when the people from France were here we had gone out to St. Albert to the parish there, and I was going through their library and had found Dr. Anne's book on the Metis. It was the Father Lacombe Chapel and we had gone into the house next door and there's a little bit of a library there and we had tea with the some of the ladies -- and they were thrilled that these people from France were there so they were taking them and showing them some stuff.*

*I came across Dr. Anne's book, and that was one of the first ones that she produced, and I don't know if you recall, but Dr. Anne's book doesn't state in the beginning where it's from. And of course I'm going through this book and then I see part of my history in there! And we phoned from there to two or*





*three different places and couldn't get in touch with anybody in order to find out where to get this book.*

*Then it happened that when the people from France were here the Lac Ste. Anne pilgrimage was on. We went out there and then we decided to go to the Callihoo [family] reunion. So when we were out there -- they had a wonderful time there with the dancing and hearing the old fiddling, you know. And this drunk man came staggering up to me and he said, 'Well you know, if these people are your relatives, then these people are your relatives.' And it turned out he was talking about Dr. Anne's sister -- but of course I didn't know it was Dr. Anne's sister at that point.*

*So we went to the L'Hirondelle [family] reunion the next night. So [my cousin from France] was saying to people, 'Pleased to meet you, pleased to meet you.' This was about the only English he knew -- and so I was introducing him to several people, and I had brought my friend along who is very bilingual, so we were introducing him to different people. And I happened to be standing behind a table talking with somebody, and I mentioned this book, and Dolphis (Dr. Anne's brother) was sitting there, and he turns around and he says, 'Well that's my sister!'. And I thought, 'Well, here is just -- I don't call them coincidences -- they are just destined to be unions!'.*

*I hadn't met [Dr. Anne Anderson]. I had no idea who she was. I was looking for the author of this book and that was the only thing I was looking for -- not realizing that Lena was her sister or any of that! So it was just amazing! So Dolphis said, 'That's my sister and she's supposed to be coming.' So then they went and phoned her but she was not feeling well enough to come so then I made arrangements to go and visit with her.*

*So that was just another event leading somebody into my life who was so tremendously important. And Dr. Anne -- she was a wonderful, wonderful person and I love her dearly and I miss her terribly. But when I look back over her life of what she accomplished, and she only started that when she was sixty, that made me think, 'There's hope for me!'.*

*I mean when I think about her life -- there's a lot of parallels between her life and my life. And I thought that is such a wonderful, wonderful thing to be able to meet this lady. I mean she was such a powerhouse and yet so much like my grandmother -- the quietness the very, very soft demeanor and yet -- nothing stopped that woman. I mean, what she accomplished in her life was unbelievable! And she only started when she was sixty, so I always think, 'There's hope for me!'. So I think meeting her was a changing point and it had an impact on my life -- just thinking, 'Here is someone that I know, who has accomplished so much, so if she could do that at sixty, you're capable of doing what you want at your age!'.*



*But her inner strength, her inner strength was so powerful and what she worked for in life was because of the passion. And I think that that is where I picked up much of what I wanted -- it was from the passion ... And reading your [Master's thesis], I'd lay there in bed reading and I'd just cry because I could just hear her, you could just hear her. You know, as she looked out over the fields, and she could tell you stories -- and that is what this book is about (motioning to her binder full of genealogical information) (Dina, p. 17-19).*

By coming into the life-story of this wise and inspirational "powerhouse", Dina's growing sense of value for her ancestral family stories was reinforced yet again. Like the other family stories she had re-claimed, Dina was again able to borrow and weave a strengthened sense of empowerment into her unfolding self-story. Dina's commitment to get connected with Dr. Anne also resulted in an infusion of passionate incentive for life pursuits she had hither to dismissed as impossible.

All of these connections and re-connections Dina established with her ancestral family stories and relations, culminated in and informed the courageous and adventurous decision she made to attend the Native Studies program at the University of Alberta:

*I decided to go to university. I hadn't decided on any faculty yet. I just got so thrilled with all my heritage that I decided to go into Native Studies. I was accepted in a week and everything just came together. It just seemed like that was the way it was supposed to be (Dina, p. 3A).*

*I started getting my education when I was in my late forties. And it has been difficult. It has been very difficult -- but I've never given up. It's taken me five and a half years to get where I'm at, and hopefully I'll graduate this summer.*

*But if I didn't have that inner strength I wouldn't have been able to go on. And discovering my Nateness encouraged me to go into Native Studies because I could have gone into any faculty I had wanted but I chose to go into that because it intrigued me. It really intrigued me to learn about Natives. So if I hadn't of gone that one step back and found out about my history, my whole family history, I don't think I would have gone into that. That's the only reason that I went into Native Studies -- because of that (Dina, p. 9).*



Never before had someone from her family pursued such a challenging academic script. However, Dina was ready to embrace this difficult endeavor since she was now living by a more empowered sense of her self. She had written and highlighted in her own life-story, stories of strength, courage, and accomplishment authored by her pioneering ancestors -- and therefore she knew that if they could pioneer and achieve so much, so could she. Essentially, Dina began to tell the, 'I am a powerful woman', story of her self -- and she also began to live this story as she pioneered this new territory for her self.

*There isn't anyone from my family who has gone on and gotten an education. As I mentioned before, there isn't anybody in my family who cares to find their Nativeness and to take from that strength (Dina, p. 28).*

As we saw in earlier episodes of Dina's pioneer story, it was common for family members to pressure her to remain within the status quo stories of her family. As Dina attempted to weave new knowledge into her evolving self-story, she was once again faced with the pull of old disempowering family stories. Even her sister, in hearing of Dina's university aspirations, attempted to recruit her back into the old family storyline by telling other family members, 'Dina is crazy for going to university!' (Dina, p. 64).

By now Dina clearly recognized that her family and her were living by different self-stories. By now Dina had infused the necessary strength and courage into the self-story she was living her life by, and therefore she was not swayed by old stories from her former homeland. Instead, Dina realized that the self-story she was in the process of re-authoring, was a storyline shaped by the empowerment of consciousness, knowledge, and purposeful action:

*Of course to [my sister], the monetary value of life is the only thing that's important. [To her] if you've got lots of bucks behind your name, there is*





*your power ... [But for me] knowledge is power. With my sister and with my father's side of the family, money is power ... But like I was saying earlier, to go to university at my age, I'll never get the monetary value from that ... So if I was only living for that, I wouldn't be doing it. And university has been the most wonderful thing! (Dina, p. 64).*

*When I took this course in anthropology, we had a doctor come in and give a talk ... and she was stating ... how we have kept the genes right from the Natives in France, and then coming over to Kahnawake, and from there they can trace those genes back. And that for me is how I have traced my feelings back to there. It is just such an intricate part of me that I cannot now separate them, and yet when I look at the rest of my family, it's not there. And yet to me now, because I have done so much studying -- I have made it become a part of me (Dina, p. 7-8).*

Again, it would be Dina's growing ancestral and cultural knowledge that seemed to thicken and shape a more empowered and proud version of her self:

*The more I learned [about Native Studies], the prouder I became, the more it became a part of me. You learn that pride of finding out how your ancestors - - the struggles they had to go through -- it was so difficult for them and yet they have accomplished so much!*

*I mean, going through history, the things that were done to eliminate the culture. That was the sole goal! And it didn't work and -- it won't work -- and that gives me a lot of pride! It gives me a lot of inner pride and it gives me a strength.*

*I've had so many struggles, so many struggles in university, where I've wondered, 'How am I going to go on? How am I going to make it?'. And I think back -- I have a great deal of things around my house that are important. I usually try to have something within my eyesight in every room that is a part of my past -- something that is there to remind me, 'Your grandmother did this, your great-grandfather did that', and I'll have the pictures there. And that will be a constant reminder of the struggles they went through. That's what made them who they are and that's what can help make me who I want to be. And it has helped me in my goal, because there has been a lot of adversity (Dina, p. 15).*

Once again we see a continuation of the process of looking backward in order to look forward. Weaving back and forth between the past, the present, and the future. Weaving the past into the present so to consciously shape the future.





Integrating inspiration from ancestral stories, and self-knowledge gleaned from challenging experiences overcome, so to nurture and strengthen her self-story. This seems to be the way in which Dina forged on in the composition of who she wanted to become.

As Dina recalled below, although her experience at university was challenging, she was able to successfully tackle this challenge through the pioneering spirit she acquired from her ancestor's life-stories, as well as through overcoming the personal challenges she refused to let define her. In this looking backwards in order to consciously move forward fashion, her sense of self was consequently strengthened by her willingness to pioneer into this new territory at university:

*I think at times university has really taken the wind out of my sails because it's difficult to write something and say, 'This is my inner being.' So to me when you write a paper, you're putting 'you' into that. And so when they take it and say, 'This! This is shit!', it's kind of hard to take ... And yet university has given me so much strength. It's helped me to become a strong person. The constant tearing down can make you stronger. But I am much stronger today than I ever have been (Dina, p. 27).*

Other new territory Dina pioneered was that of training as an addictions counsellor at the Nechi Institute. She pursued this training while in university. Again as she emphasized below, this was another important experience that connected her with knowledge of her heritage, while also providing her with another challenge overcome that could further authenticate who it was she was becoming. Again, by pursuing this additional learning, she was able to integrate the strengthening knowledge she acquired into her increasingly empowered story of her self:

*Nechi has been an important part of me because of course everything there and all of the teachings are done from the Native teachings ... because it's not only experiential learning but it's learning in the Native way. So to me that's the balance. I mean the teachings of the medicine wheel and those things are*



*all such an important part and that to me is why Natives have lost so much -- because so much of that has been taken from them (Dina, p. 8).*

*Nechi is Native oriented, just being around Natives has really been a great part of my education, having the holistic side of Nativeness, the experiential teachings of Nechi, working together as a team. With Nechi you're with the same people once a week, very intense once a week for a year, they become such a part of you ...*

*And the experiential part of it was very exciting for me ... And that's what Nechi was like. It's very, very hands on, it's very experiential learning going there and people actually listen to you ... That was thrilling because they listened and you would go into your group and you would have to plan, and I would be able to give my input, and it would become a part of the plan. You'd have to take scenarios, and there's a lot of role-playing, and so they would give you an idea, and then you would have to brainstorm, and come up with ideas, and then make up a play then come back and present it. So you had to work as a team together which was nice. I enjoyed that (Dina, p. 79-80).*

As well, this "team" experience connected Dina with many others who were also working to re-construct their own stories of self. Her pioneering had often been such an isolating endeavor. But through this experience she was again reminded that she was not the only pioneer attempting to forge new territory -- and a more empowered story to live by:

*So many Natives who have been destroyed by alcohol and drugs have found an answer by reclaiming their Nativeness. When they've gone back to the holistic teachings, when they've gone back to going to the sweats, and listening to their Elders, and smoking the pipe ... I mean it is so important, the honesty, and getting in touch with Elders and just listening, and getting in touch with their Nativeness -- it has cured them. You know, it has been an crucial part of learning to accept who they are -- and that they can. Like I said, to me, it is the calming of the waters. And that is exactly what it is to many of the Natives out there (Dina, p. 8).*

*Being at Nechi, learning from Natives from all over Canada, being with people, being with addictions, and finding parallels in the stories. It amazed me how you could take the name off these people at Nechi, and it's the same chapter. It's the same parallel. They're driven, they're driven ... (Dina, p. 86-87).*



Dina's connections and re-connections with her ancestral family stories and relations also informed her pioneering decision to abandon her strict Baptist upbringing in order to join the Sacred Heart Native-Catholic Church of Edmonton. By now she was living her life by a far more empowered story of self, rather than by a story informed by her father's constraining expectations. Despite her father's dislike of her religious conversion, Dina pioneered in this direction anyhow, trusting that the experience would further nurture and authenticate her evolving self-story:

*Joining Sacred Heart Church was another connection that I had. I love church. I really love church. I love the Nativeness and the sincerity ... I've been going to Sacred Heart three years. I like the way they take in the Nativeness -- the sweet grass -- it's a unique combination.*

*So I started going there and I wasn't even Catholic! My girlfriend was going there, that's the church she grew up in ... she started going back there ... and she just asked me to go one day. And that was the healing service for Elija Harper, and I was just so taken with it -- their prayers and their allegiance to him and their concern for his health. I think about that almost every Sunday since I first attended.*

*I grew up southern Baptist. My dad is not terribly thrilled with the fact that I'm Catholic. I don't know -- maybe it was because my grandmother was Catholic that I just feel a rightness. Like I said, none of my family has anything to do with their Nativeness, nothing (Dina, p. 4A).*

Dina's belief in her self as a "powerful woman" was even further enhanced by this nurturing and strengthening connection she integrated into her life. Once again it connected her more closely to the empowering history she gained strength from, rather than living within the oppressive religious story her family had created for themselves:

*I was raised into a religious home but I certainly wasn't raised into a Christ-like home. And the Nativeness of the medicine wheel, the holistic viewpoint of Natives is Christianity. And those two circles are so intertwined in my life that you can't take the connectedness away from them because they are so far overlapped in my life. And the more I go through life the closer those circles*





*have grow and now they are almost overlapping ... It's very, very powerful. And I do get my strength from that. I get my inner strength from God. I get a lot of the joy from the feeling of who I am, from my Nativeness, from coming to terms with those things in my life (Dina, p. 31-32).*

Ultimately, Dina has pointed to all of these meaningful ancestral life-stories, cultural discoveries, and personal challenges overcome as the inspirational threads which she used to weave and create her own empowering story of who she is and who she wants to become. It has been a learning-from-the-past-in-order-to-consciously-move-forward process -- borrowing knowledge from the past, in order to become informed and strengthened in the present, in order to courageously and consciously forge a preferred future. Each of these knowledge re-claiming experiences built upon the last, gradually forging and creating, from the fertile frontier -- a nurturing "haven" and strengthening "rock" for this determined pioneer. All by abandoning oppressive stories while reclaiming empowering stories:

*Discovering my Nativeness was coming home. Going to university was the biggest challenge of my life. Being at Nechi -- these have all been bricks in the wall ... going through co-dependence, dealing with my sex abuse -- those are all things that I have taken in, I've drawn from all of them ... I have taken from all of those things and I have become a person that I am proud of. What's there, you have to use ... and I'm using everything that I've got. And that, to me, is where I am (Dina, p. 86-87).*

Dina has truly done just that -- she has used "what's there" (p. 87). Dina has not only "used" her empowering ancestral stories to gain a strengthened sense of her self. But she has also mined from her oppressive paternal family stories some empowering threads as well.

On more than one occasion, Dina made the point that she reconstructed her self-story not only by gaining strength from her empowering ancestral stories, but also by borrowing from select inspiring threads she was able to pull from her paternal





family stories. Dina referred to this process as "pulling from their strengths" (Dina, p. 44). Here are examples of this process Dina described, as well as the strengths she pulled from their life-stories:

*I think that, in thinking over the things that have happened, my identity has come from things that I don't want to be and from things that I have learned from. I mentioned that my father is a bigot, still is a bigot. But he is amazing. He is 92 years old. Him and his [second] wife ... are going to Alaska on a three week trip! I am amazed at the man, the strength, the physical strength of him -- but -- I don't want to be like him. I take from his strength (p. 35).*

*And yet I take from my parents. I take from my father his ability to work with what he had because in a great sense my father was the best that he could be and he accomplished a lot ... And my mother, I loved my mother's ability to love and to be content -- she was a weak woman and she was extremely sickly (p. 30-31).*

*I take from my grandfather's strength. My grandfather left Britain with a brother to come work in the mines. He was a miner in Britain and he came here with my father who was 18 months old, with his sister who was 6 months old -- that's pretty amazing when I think of it! (Dina, p. 35).*

In this fashion, Dina borrowed empowerment from her preferred paternal life-story threads, while consciously recognizing that there were also disempowering threads within these stories that she had the option of "using" -- or not "using" -- in the composition of her own self story. With this awareness she consciously decided she would not adopt the paternal threads which she deemed disempowering to the story she wanted to live and tell of her self:

*With my dad's family there is such tremendous, tremendous strength -- and a negative force and that is a real draw. And I realize how much I am of them when I look around. The things that I love are from them. I look at my books, I look at my pictures, the furniture, those are things from them, and I love them. They had a marvelous side to them, but they had that hard line, a real hard line of right and wrong.*

*I have a lot of admiration for those people, for my family. They had little and they did much with it. And that's a lot like I am. I've had a very hard life*



*financially and yet I've done marvelously well with my resources that I do have. So, I have learned an awful lot from them in that way. And I love them -- but there's not a bond, there's not a closeness ... because there's a real coldness, there's a real black and white, everything has a line and it's right or it's wrong. And life isn't black and white. Life is mostly the gray areas! (Dina, p. 44-45).*

Another example of how Dina engaged in this selective process of "pulling from their strengths" was evidenced as she explained the sense of admiration she eventually gained for her paternal grandmother when she discovered more of this woman's own adverse life-story (Dina, p. 44):

*I think of the main things in my life -- the influences I've had -- that's my grandmother over there (pointing to a framed black and white photograph in her living room) ... she was raised in an orphanage ... She's the one with the very negative learnings ... I don't want to be her ... she was cruel ... and yet I admire them, I really do. Look at her. The fact that she wasn't wanted by her parents, and missing her parents, and growing up in an orphanage. And yet she was a strong woman ... I take the good things from her (Dina, p. 59-61).*

*I can't imagine being alone the way she was, in an orphanage where you are all alone, you don't have any family and friends ... So to be raised without love and yet she was a very strong woman. She was a tiny, tiny woman and yet she was incredibly strong, an incredible homemaker, of course that was when you had to certainly do everything on your own. She was very good at what she did ... She's very cold but she still was successful ... I think that a woman who would be in a loveless marriage, who would be willing to leave her homeland with two youngsters to come to a land that they had no idea of -- you have to admire a woman who would be that dedicated (Dina, p. 80-81).*

By learning of the dedication and adventuresome spirit possessed by her paternal grandmother, Dina again wove into her own story of self a further thread of fortitude. This was accomplished as Dina separated her grandmother's undesirable "cold" nature from her inspirational "dedicated" nature. In this way, Dina again demonstrated her recognition that she could separate and borrow from her grandmother's empowering story threads while consciously leaving less desirable threads out of her own life-story composition.



Ultimately, the forging of an empowering story of her self -- the "I am a powerful woman" story -- Dina now lives and tells, was accomplished through consciously and actively reclaiming her ancestral and cultural stories, embracing new learning experiences, and overcoming difficult personal challenges. This process seemed to involve distinguishing between family scripts she felt would empower her story of self or disempower it -- followed by actively pulling from and integrating these strengthening and inspiring threads into her own reconstruction of her sense of self. Dina's pioneering process also involved consciously and actively making decisions to learn and grow from the personal challenges she had endured and overcome within the timeline of her own life. It was a resourceful process of borrowing-from-the-past-in-order-to-consciously-move-forward in the present and future.

One day during the close of our research conversation, Dina poignantly verified for me the essence of this difficult, yet empowering, pioneering process. Again her words echoed of the conscious and active self-shaping process she has intently pursued in order to forge and create a nurturing "haven" and strengthening "rock" within the story she lives and tells of a powerful woman named Dina:

*Well there aren't any new lands to conquer. I don't get in a canoe and travel off to distant lands -- but I have taken my own canoe and I have gone down and traveled roads when I didn't know where they would take me (Dina, p. 32).*





## Chapter Nine

### Living By A “Using-Everything-That-I’ve-Got” Process:

#### The Ongoing Process Of Creating A More Empowering Story of Self

Authoring an empowering self-story is a continual process. It is a life's work that is ongoing. Telling and living the "I am a powerful woman" story is not about telling and living a finished product. Just as a successful pioneer continually works at settling into their comforting "haven" and strengthening "rock", Dina's own work will need to continue in order to keep her "I am a powerful woman" self-story alive and well.

Even as she lives from and tells this new empowering story of her self, Dina must continuously deal with the challenge of non-sensical and opposing stories being lived within the world she is embedded. Not everyone around Dina is as familiar or accepting of this newer more empowering self-story she now lives and tells. Her self-story does not exist on its own. Her story collides, intermingles, and engages in reciprocal influencing acts with other self-stories everyday. It is this common reality that engages Dina in an ongoing process of attempting to make sense of the daily storylines her own story of self comes into contact with:

*It wasn't more than a month ago I was talking to my father and that's when I found out how close I was to graduating. I phoned him up and said, 'Well dad, I'm going to be graduating this summer!'*

*And it wasn't, 'Well isn't that great! I'm proud of you' or whatever. Instead it was, 'Well you actually think you're going to make it?'. And I said, 'Yah dad, I do.' And I turned it around and I said, 'Well dad, there's been many times that I've wondered if I was going to make it but I get my strength from you, from the fact that --', my father, to me, was pretty amazing. When he had to leave the farm, because of my mother's health, and come into the city and start a new way of life and we had five children and he raised us in a small home and we never lacked anything. We never had any luxuries in life but we always had good food. We always had adequate clothing and housing.*



*So I gave him the compliment and he turned that around to me and said, 'Well yah, it's really a shame that the only one in my family that is a success is your sister.' And I thought, 'That is exactly what I've gone through all my life!'. I can give you a compliment, you can turn it around, and take it from me, and slap me in the face. And so you have to know who you are, you have to know where you want to go, you have to know yourself (Dina, p. 27).*

Dina's dialogue about more present day events reflects her awareness that working to make sense out of non-sensical situations, like the above, is an ongoing and challenging process. It is a daily struggle that she faces from all sides. A struggle which essentially pits her newer self-story against confusing storylines which attempt to alter the stronger version of the present story she tells of her self:

*At Nechi ... most of the people that attend there are from the reserves -- so that is a different mind-set when you live on a reserve. It's like I was lower -- because I was not from a reserve. So I get that there. Then at University I get, 'You're an Indian', because I'm in Native Studies. So it is like I'm not good enough for here and I'm not good enough for there.*

*So if you're not strong, if you don't know who you are, or where you are going, or what you want, you could be just like a leaf in the wind -- because you kind of get blown from all sides.*

*And I told a story at Nechi one day -- and at the end of the sessions you stand around in a circle and you hold hands and you say the Serenity Prayer. Before we were going to do that one of the guys said to me, 'I just want to say, how DARE you talk about Indians!'. And I said, 'Excuse me?! Just because I wasn't born on a reserve doesn't mean I'm anything less. I am just the same as you are -- I have just as much Native blood in me as you do.' So you get that -- a lot of that from there. And I've also got that at the university too. So you have know, you have to be strong (Dina, p. 14).*

Through reclaiming her ancestral stories, Dina has been able to pioneer a more grounded, integrated, and settled story of her self, which has allowed her to handle adversity with degrees of strength similar to that of her pioneering ancestors. Through reclaiming her ancestral stories, she has also realized that she has the empowering option of choosing which story she will live her life by. This she does



by resourcefully using everything that she's got. Just as her ancestors pioneered in search of a meaningful and sustaining place to settle, Dina, too has worked to pioneer and settle her own nurturing "haven" and strengthening "rock" story from which she can live. No longer is she like the leaf blown "hither and thither" by the wind (Dina, p. 34):

*I have been referred to as "The Rock, you are always the rock," and I resented it because I feel the biblical parallel of being built on sand, like I may be a rock, like I'm not on a good foundation. But that has changed. It's changed drastically in the last little while.*

*Sorting through things and saying, 'You know what? That's somebody else's feelings that I'm not good enough. That's their moral code, not mine. I am a good person. I am a strong person, I have a right to happiness.' I can't change yesterday, I can't be who somebody else wants me to be. My father means the world to me and I don't mean the world to my father. That hurts. It hurts a lot that I can never be good enough, I can never be good enough. If I went to the moon, if I was a brain surgeon, but as far as he's concerned, I screwed up my life. Those things hurt but I'm not a second-class citizen. So what if I'm divorced, so be it.*

*I have to be accountable for what I think, say, and do today. Who I am today is important. What I am today is important. Where I go from today is important because now I know, I was that shaft in the wind, where ever the wind took me, that's where I went, but that's not what you should be in life.*

*I'm thankful that today, I am where I am. What's there, you have to use. There's an immorality that I find, in not using what you have. I'm using everything that I've got. And that to me is why I am where I am (Dina, p. 85-87).*

\*       \*       \*

This has been a story about a pioneer. It has also been a story about the implications of being embedded within many other stories -- silenced stories, abandoned stories, parallel stories, and re-discovered stories. But most of all, it has been a story about one woman's life-long endeavor to re-construct a strengthening



dialogue she can live within her self, and tell about her self, as she forges onward through the complex landscape of stories she is situated within.





## CHAPTER SIX

### NARRATIVES OF EXPERIENCE: AUDREY

#### VISION QUEST --- VISION CREATION

*The essence of genius is taking things ...  
and seeing them as possibilities.  
These people are visionaries.  
(Martin, 1989, p. 2)*

*Projecting a new vision is artistic;  
it's a task each of us pursues in composing our lives.  
(Bateson, 1989, p. 239)*



## VISION QUEST --- VISION CREATION

### Chapter One

#### Difficult Determinations:

##### *Growing Up Amidst "Missing" and "Confusing" Stories*

I could argue that the seeds of Audrey's visionary process were quietly sown during her childhood, as she was faced with some difficult situations which invited her to question and become curious regarding her sense of self.

Audrey Poitras (nee Dumont) was born in the primarily Native community of Frog Lake Alberta, to a mother of English descent, who was a teacher, and to a father who was a Metis Cree trapper and farmer. There were eight children born to the Dumont family, with Audrey being the third youngest. Her early years were spent within scenes characterized by the comfortable folds of a tightly knit family:

*And this (showing me two photographs of old square log cabins) was actually our house, one was the house we lived in and one was our granny's house, we all lived together. I say sometimes when I look at it I think it looked like a colony (laughing). But I just remember that my granny lived here and our house was right beside it.*

*It was a nice area because there was a pond and then up on this hill from it lived my dad's brother Louis, my uncle Louis, and then aunty Alice -- her husband was Louis also, Louis Daniels, and they lived over on the other side. It was like everybody was around and then they had their pasture where everybody had their cattle and their horses together. For us as kids it was really nice because we had everybody right there to play with -- it was all so connected (Audrey, p. 47).*



Audrey recalled her pre-school aged story of self as essentially free of the perplexing identity questions which would eventually become her life's work. Through her childhood eyes life seemed fairly free and uncomplicated. However this sense of unquestioned and easy knowing was not to be long lived. As Audrey regretfully stated in hindsight, "...there was more to [our identity story] we should have known" (p. 65):

*I don't think I even thought about [family discussions of our identity] missing at that time ... I think one of the reasons our family was a little different was because my mom was English and didn't speak the Cree language, so my dad didn't speak Cree, and when my [paternal] grandma came they spoke Cree and she had all her own ways of doing things and her own habits and we just saw it there.*

*So I think I grew up knowing there was a difference between what my mom did and what my dad's and my grandma's beliefs were or how they did things or talked. So I grew up knowing that -- but just accepting it, accepting that there were two different types of people here.*

*I think in most families where there's both Native parents or Metis parents, I don't believe they do a lot of talking about who they are, it just comes automatically, you're just part of it and you grow up being part of it and it's there. Probably because of my mom not growing up in that sort of lifestyle, she did things her way and my dad did things his way, and we knew there was a difference, we saw there was a difference. But I don't think as a kid I thought, "Why aren't they talking to us about it?". I don't think I really thought about that ...*

*However, we should have talked about it, being as there were the two different people. I guess that's why I say, in a lot of our Metis families where there are two Metis parents or there's a First Nations and a Metis, everything is much clearer, you just grow up knowing it, and maybe it doesn't need to be talked about as much. But in our family it should have been talked about more ... we should have talked more ... (Audrey, p. 64-65).*

Prior to beginning school, Audrey had her parents, extended family, and a wealth of family tradition available and there within her childhood story. The setting





and family characters available within this early story allowed for Audrey to be exposed to her mother and father's equally rich and unique ways of being in the world. Young Audrey seemed able to see, sense, and accept that there were differences between her family members. She seemed to understand that she could be a part of these differences as well as enriched and shaped by these differences. At this point in her story, it all appeared there for the taking. Unfortunately this was soon to change.

\*       \*       \*

Audrey and I met for our first formal research conversation during the spring of 1998. She agreed to meet at my home. I initiated the conversation by posing the question, "Looking back over your life, what stories would you tell in order to explain your sense of who you are?"

There was thoughtful hesitation before she responded. I sensed her quietly reeling back through time. Her eyes misted softly, as they often would. Even as she responded, her kind and cheerful voice could not disguise the surfacing pain that seemed to gently wash it's way upon the shores of her recollections. It occurred to me that she seemed to work very hard at holding back these bubbles of emotion:

*To me as a child, it was kind of difficult determining who I was. My father passed away when I was nine years old and the things that I learned from him, even in that short while, always seemed to stick in my mind. Maybe it was because you know you're not going to hear anymore. But it seemed to me, even though my mother was always there, it was the things that I did with him or that he did or he told us which I always seemed to remember.*

*After my father passed away we didn't see much of his family and, to me, I think that was a part of why I felt I didn't really know who I was -- because I knew there was him and his family. Not to blame my mother or anything because she was left with eight children and she had been a school teacher*



*and she had quit teaching after three of the kids were born. At the time that my father passed away she wasn't teaching but after dad died she had to get back into it. My youngest brother, at that time, was not quite six years old. So it was kind of like she had all these kids, so it really wasn't her fault that we didn't see anybody. She didn't drive and back then it wasn't as easy to go places as it is now. To us back then going to town, which was ten miles away, was a big event. So I'm sure it was very hard for her.*

*So it seemed like we lost part of who we were because we never saw my grandma or my aunts and my uncles from that side of the family -- and actually I never did again until after I grew up and then I went back and started seeing them. That part to me was (pause) -- you know who you are but you know there are a lot more stories and there's a lot more learning to do that you're missing out on. So that was the hard part in my life, not knowing that (Audrey, p. 1).*

*...When I think about it -- I think that I probably felt like I didn't really know - I felt like there was something missing -- like I didn't know -- who I was. I can say I had a good life, like I mean my mom did a very good job of raising eight kids on her own and providing for us, but I guess now when I think back it was like there always was something missing (Audrey, p.13).*

This significant loss seemed to open a chapter in Audrey's young life that came to be initially written around a confusing search plotline -- before a plotline characterized by personal improvisation really took hold. Young Audrey lived with a keen sense of "something missing" from her sense of self (Audrey, p. 13). She was aware of a confusing emptiness that seemed to leave her feeling disconnected from a more complete notion of her identity. Audrey's relationship with her father had been a close one. Prior to losing him, Audrey looked toward her father to identify and pattern her developing sense of self from. Even as a pre-schooler she seemed to make choices to pattern her story of self after the essence of the enjoyable story her father seemed to live by:

*I was a real tomboy when I was little -- I seemed to fit in better with dad than staying in the house and doing the things I was probably supposed to be*



*doing. I was very fond of being out with the cattle and going out to help him with his traps. So I was always there and he enjoyed it too. We did spend quite a lot of time together, probably more than some of my sisters did ... I think he had quite a big impact on my life (Audrey, p. 4).*

*I used to get up early so that I could go with him, at times it was like I was favored by him, that's what my sisters and brothers used to say, but I think it was more that I wanted to be there. I wanted to be part of that and so I made that extra effort to be there (Audrey, p. 16).*

*My sisters were always expected to stay inside the house but I was like one of the boys that could go when dad went to see his traps or go when he went to look for cattle. It was like even though I was a girl I had that, whereas my sisters didn't. But I had the special connection. It was like, "It's okay to come with me." (Audrey, p. 35).*

Audrey knew she shared an especially precious relationship with her father, one that afforded her a fuller and more complete sense of her young self. Much of her early identity or self-story was shaped by this "special treatment" she experienced with her father (Audrey, p. 35). And so the vast loss that accompanied his death, propelled Audrey forward in hopes of filling the pervasive sense of "something missing" that came to live her in his absence (p. 13):

*When I was in grade one we had a pig that was going to have little piglets and so we were all told, "This pig is going to have pigs soon." So we were all waiting to see these little pigs. I remember my dad saying, "Whoever gets up first and goes to see the pigs first when they are born will get to pick one pig for their own." And I always remember not even really being awake and my dad whispering "Come on, come on, come on!". We went out and there was this whole litter of pigs and there was this one with a black stripe in it and of course I got to have this special pig because it was different.*

*So it was like I always got special treatment, or that's what I got from that, like there was probably a reason why he was making sure I got out to get my pig. That was something that I remembered for a long time after, as a special kind of treatment. That made me feel really good ...like I was the special one. But maybe my sisters and brothers felt the same way for certain other reasons. But that really gave me a sense that there was a reason why I was special that day.*



*So yah, I think the more I look at it, that's why I really felt I had to know my dad's family, whereas some of my sisters don't even really know my dad's family. They have never made that attempt to go back and see them or to find them. So I think those were some of the things that made me realize that I wanted to know more. It was because of those things as a kid (Audrey, p. 35-36).*

Not long after the loss of Audrey's father, the family moved away from the much loved farm, sadly leaving behind the land, lifestyle, and extended Metis relations that felt like the last remaining visible threads tying Audrey to her father's story. She recalled feeling like an empty void had been created in her just developing sense of self:

*I was probably only six or seven, I remember getting up early in the morning to go check the traps with my dad. We all had turns to go with him. It was really a different kind of lifestyle -- and it was just like all of a sudden we lost that.*

*We moved into town, my mom rented a house from a lady. It was a very small house because that was all we could afford at that time. We went to school and she taught but it was the only way we could live at that time. It was too hard for us to be on the farm because once she started teaching, of course, there were just so many things that she needed to do after school. She didn't drive ... there really weren't a lot of choices. She was working and she had to make a living for us.*

*We went from being on a farm, we were just how farmers, travelers, and hunters are, you know, you just do what you have to do when you have to do it! There's not always a real structure to what you do. Whereas, once my dad was gone we had to -- well mom had to do her thing, so you had to do your thing. Everybody had to take on certain roles. So it was a big change for all of us ... (her voice trailed off into a quiet tearful pause) (Audrey, p. 2-4).*

During this same painful time Audrey was beginning elementary school. She attended the same school where her mother Mable taught. Audrey's experiences at school began to add to her growing feeling of disconnectedness. It seemed while in





school that her story of self often felt reduced to the title, "Mable's kid". To add to the difficulty of this confining identification, came the confusing feelings that arose when Audrey was queried as to her mixed heritage. She remembered feeling confused, defensive, and unsure of whom she was. Her sense of "something missing" was powerful during these times. It must have been terribly difficult to feel such confusion and to not have the stories, experiences, or characters available that could have helped thicken or deepen her "missing" sense of self (p. 13):

*I remember as a kid wanting to know more about my dad and wanting to know more about my dad's family ... When we did go to school my mom was right there with us all the time so we were just identified as "Mable's kids". And because my dad wasn't around it was obvious that, "They are not exactly like their mom, they're different". Because my mom is very, very fair, she had blond hair and most of us are darker like my dad (Audrey, p. 10-11).*

*I don't recall us discussing as a family or even with my parents, "Well, you're Metis and this is why you're Metis..." I don't ever recall anything like that. Maybe it was because of [my parents] attitude, "You know who you are, so just be yourself, you don't have to be what people expect you to be. You can be who you are. You be what you are." ... My mom she'd say, "Well, does it really matter? You know who you are." (Audrey, p. 26).*

*We were just "Mable's kids", we really didn't have our own identity, we were just "Mable's kids". But when I first went to grade two or three there was all this talk about 'who you are' and 'what you are'. And there was discussion among the kids as to what we were. And somebody said, "Well, you're French", and somebody said, "No, you're Indian I think".*

*So these kids were discussing us like that. And I remember saying, "No, we're not Indian, we're part French and part Indian, but we're not Indian and we're not French." ... To me the confusing part was when people would say to me, "So what are you?", to try to explain it as a child ...*

*That was the confusing part, to me it was okay that I could say, "I know what I am and it doesn't really matter." But at those times, as a young kid, it was confusing because I couldn't explain to somebody who I was, all I could say was, "Yah I know who I am." But we didn't have enough knowledge to be able to actually say to somebody, "This is who I am, as a Metis person, this is who*



*I am." We didn't have enough knowledge to be able to explain who we were and that was the confusing part.*

*But I knew within myself, it was a way I was defending who I was, because I couldn't really come out and say, "This is who I am". So that was the confusing part, as a young child, nobody had ever sat down and said, "This is what Metis are, this is who you are, and this is why you are who you are." So that was the confusing part to me, not being able to actually go into an explanation.*

*I guess I clearly took my mom and dad's words, "You know who are and that's all that matters, nobody else even needs to know, you know." So that was the confusing part to me, not being able to convey that to somebody else (Audrey, p. 63-64).*

The notion of “missing” stories seemed to thread it’s way through Audrey’s young life. However, contrary to her awakening sense of “something missing” with regard to her father’s story, this next story, the story of the Frog Lake Cairn, remained a silent in descript story until Audrey’s adulthood. It was then that Audrey quite surprisingly happened upon some history that, in turn, seemed to heighten her curiosity with regard to the larger missing stories that could inform the emptiness she sensed within her self:

*I grew up where ...there was this big stone cairn which was put up after ...the Frog Lake Massacre, as it was labeled there, it had the names of all the people who died there. It was a mile from where we lived ...but at the time it really didn't mean a lot to me or to any of us. We didn't understand the significance of it.*

*We used to walk right up to that cairn everyday to catch the bus to go to school. And when I think about it I think, "It's too bad we didn't understand what it was. It's too bad we didn't know why it was there." We really didn't know a lot about it at that time. We simply didn't talk about it ...*

*After I had left home and was married ...It was later when we would go to meetings [at The Metis Nation] and sit and listen and talk about things, that was when I would connect and say, "Yah, that was part of me, that was part*



*of where I was!”. After I became involved with Metis Nation I began to really think, “Gee, that was part of me and I could have been knowing so much more back then!”.*

*I don’t think I’ve ever made sense of why we didn’t know or why we weren’t told as a kid about this important historic event. It was never explained to us like, “This is something really important, or something special, or even this is just something that happened”. Even now when I think about us going up there to catch the bus – it was like it meant nothing, it was nothing, we never identified it as any specific thing (Audrey, p. 24-26).*

The Cairn Story lacked relevance until Audrey’s adulthood. Until she discovered the history behind it, it remained another silent story, that would eventually add fuel to her confusion and frustration when she did discover the Cairn’s significance for the Metis people and their identity.

Audrey struggled to make sense of her self-story during these early years. The loss of her father, and the subsequent challenges this meant for a mother with eight children, understandably made for a childhood scene ripe with feelings of emptiness, confusion, and difficult determinations.





## Chapter Two

### The Initial Shaping of a Budding Visionary:

#### Experiences Which Nurtured Her Story of Self

Audrey reflected upon the early experiences that nurtured her budding visionary spirit. She recalled two significant characters around her, in life and in history, who evoked within her a stronger sense of self, while mentoring her in the spirit of realizing possibilities and creating direction from vision. One character was her aunt, her mother's sister. Another character -- the legendary hero and defender of the Metis identity on the Canadian frontier, Gabriel Dumont, who happened to be a familial ancestor of Audrey's father.

Audrey clearly recalled being shaped by the strength, kindness, and directed vision her mother's sister instilled in her. Through Audrey's relationship with her aunt, the beginnings of her visionary spirit and belief seemed to be nurtured, as Audrey was encouraged to compose a story of self characterized by determination and realized goals. A story similar to the one her aunt proudly lived by:

*Another person who had a big impact on my life was my mother's older sister, her name was Grace Franks. My aunt never had any kids ... and her husband passed away when in his 50's and she just passed away a month ago and she was 102 years old.*

*After her husband passed away she kept the farm for about a year, they had a big farm with cattle, and she kept that farm for about a year -- and she used to say to us, "I kept it just to prove I could do it" (laughing). That's the kind of person she was.*

*She came to town to live with us -- this was after my dad had passed away. And because she had no children of her own we were like her kids too. I think she had a real impact on all of us as a family because she had certain things*



*that she believed -- and one thing she used to always say to us was, "You can do anything you want, just don't quit". She had this favorite little poem she would recite that was called "Don't Quit" and over and over she used to say to us, "There's no reason why you can't do anything you want, you just can't quit!".*

*We were going to school and my mom was teaching. My mom didn't have a lot of extra time to cook and spend time with us because she had her work and of course with eight kids I guess you don't have a lot of time. So my aunt used to cook for us -- and special stuff -- and we used to come home from school at lunchtime and we always knew when she was there because she used to have this special potato and egg soup she used to always cook for us. And she used to cook English scones with raisins for us all the time. We really appreciated her. She taught us a lot, a lot.*

*It was just her whole attitude towards life, she was just so positive all the time -- like for everybody there was something good. It didn't matter -- like I had brothers who got into trouble a lot and she used to always say, "But that's okay because they'll do this or they'll do that..." and it was like she always found the good regardless of how much bad anybody else could find, she'd always come up with something good about somebody.*

*So to us she was so positive about everything. Even about things like how we weren't rich. We had a lot of hand-me-down clothes and she would always find something good about it. She'd always say, "But look at this or look at that!". She always found some reason to make you think, "Well it's not so bad after all".*

*That was just the kind of person she was. I think she had a real effect on all of us. We saw our mom as very busy and trying to provide for this big family and not really having a lot of time to spend personally with each one of us and so my aunt kind of filled in there. I think that helped us understand who we were and [my mother's] side of the family (Audrey, p. 4-5).*

I next heard about this special aunt during a research conversation with Audrey at her office at The Metis Nation of Alberta. I asked Audrey if she had any significant memory pieces she would be willing to show me and speak about. I was interested in items that would deepen my understanding of how she constructed her sense of self, items that represented or reflected her process.



As I sat down, Audrey announced, "I've brought some things to show you".

A handful of books were then brought forward ... and the stories trickled forth. A small-antiquated reading book was presented:

*This is from my aunty Grace. I've had this book for a long time, which she gave me. It is an old, old book, and I think now I must have always been a person who was interested in what went on. Why else would she give it specifically to me when I had seven brothers and sisters and she had a brother who had three kids?*

*This was a book from when [her husband] moved out here from England, he moved to Canada not too long before my mom's family came out. But they met over here and got married over here and this was a book that came from his cousin in England to him and it was in the Christmas of 1892. She said he would read a lot and so they used to send him books and he used to write and he wrote this little poem in the back.*

*[My aunt] said to me, "I'm giving you this book because I know you'll keep it." So when I think about it now, I must have always given her the impression that I was interested in what went on before me because that was probably why I got it ... she gave it to me and she said, "He wrote this nice little poem in here and so I want to give it to you because I know you will keep it."*

*So last night I was trying to think, "What else would have made me who I am or had anything to do with it?". And I came across this book and I was thinking, "Well now, she must have thought I presented something to give her the idea that I was a person that was very interested in who people were even before we knew them, so I thought that was something!"*

*I took it as being a real honor, knowing that she didn't have kids of her own but she had a lot of nieces and nephews that all were important to her. And to think that I was more important to be able to have this book made me think, "I must be doing something right. I must be leaving some good impression with her that I'm doing something right in order for her to want me to look after such an important book." It made me think that, "Something that I'm doing is of value. If an older person like her thinks that I'm worthwhile and worthy of this, I must be on the right track." When I look at it now, I'm sure that's what I must have thought (Audrey, p. 50-51).*

Audrey's relationship with her aunt seemed to infuse her budding sense of self with "value and worth" (p. 50). These gestures her aunt shared carried potent



meanings. Instead of accentuating the pervasive sense of “something missing”, these experiences infused in Audrey a sense of importance, connectedness, regard for one’s ancestral stories, and a budding spirit of determination in regard to creating the desired options she wanted from her life:

*(Pulling out an old paperback log book browning with age) This was a book that my aunt used to keep, they were big farmers, her and her husband. She wrote down everything, like how many calves they were going to have that year and the prices of things they picked up.*

*(Pointing to entries in the book) Here, this was when they needed to buy five bushels of potatoes and that was going to cost them one dollar and fifty cents. This was how she kept track of when their cows were going to calf and the date they were due. It was just like a journal that people keep. She has how many bales of hay that they would buy from the reserve. And she has, "Hay owed by the Indians", and then she has the name of who owed them. This entry was from when she would trade at the store for fifteen pounds of butter...*

As we looked through the circa 1922 entries in the old brown journal, I asked Audrey, “What does this mean for you?”:

*To think that these were people that I actually knew, and to know that things were really difficult, and that was the way they managed to have their big farm ... To me it really showed me how people managed to get where they were, rather than not really thinking about it.*

*My aunt and her husband were like, "If we work towards building, we are going to be better off in the end. We'll be able to do all of these things." So to me, I think it meant learning that there are different ways that you can get to where you want to get to.*

*What it tells me is that regardless of which way I took to get to where I'm at, when you take on a role like I've taken on now, you need to be able to have different options and different ways of doing things because one way doesn't always work, especially in the broad scope of what we have to do here at Metis Nation.*

*When your dealing with different levels of government, you're dealing with industry, you're dealing with people, you're dealing with so many different*





*aspects of it that what works with one, doesn't always work with another. I mean I've only been here 18 months as a leader but more and more I see that we really have to strategize how we negotiate with people to get what we need for everybody.*

*So I think that [this journal] shows me that there can be many ways to get to where you want to go, and sometimes a person needs to have more than one way of doing business to get where you want to end up (Audrey, p. 52-54).*

An echoing of how Audrey's connection with her aunt seemed to open up her budding realization that possibilities and options do exist, and, if they do not seem apparent, perhaps they can be created. Audrey was beginning to sense that authoring a more complete and preferred story of her self seemed to be about gathering inspirations, exploring options, honing one's determination, and then essentially creating who she wanted to become, from the other possible ways of being and doing. The seeds of this sense had been planted -- the wisdom that comes with time and experience would now be necessary in order to see Audrey, the visionary, truly break ground.

\*       \*       \*

The story of Gabriel Dumont, the historical Metis hero, was introduced to Audrey during her early years. She was in elementary school when she remembered hearing of the legendary Dumont. Little did young Audrey know how influential Dumont's life-story would become in offering her validation and mentorship as she worked to create who she wanted to become years later:

*I think the first time [I heard of Dumont] was when I was in school and I was in grade four or five and we were in our history class and our teacher was talking and somehow it came up that "Gabriel Dumont did this." And all of a sudden she said, "Dumont! Oh, and we have Dumonts in our class!". And so*



*of course the kids started to say, "How are you related? Are you related?" (Audrey, p. 70).*

Dumont's larger story of vision, leadership, and pride would not be fully appreciated or understood until Audrey's adulthood, however his introduction during her early years seemed to further nurture her growing sense of value as an individual:

*All of a sudden, what really clicked in me was, "Here we are talking about a historical person and this is my ancestor!". So of course it was, "Oh my, she's got a famous family!", that was the reaction from the class. I think that was the first time that it really clicked for me in terms of how important Gabriel was, not only to us as a family but to other people ...to really see him as a person who was a big part of the whole of Canadian history (Audrey, p. 70).*

Encountering characters such as Dumont and her inspiring aunt seemed to expose Audrey to the inspirational spirit of possibilities. The notion that one can create a desired life, from envisioned possibilities, began to gradually take hold.



### Chapter Three

#### Living What Seemed A “Big People” Script:

##### *Her Struggle to Compose A Story of Self That Made Sense*

Despite feeling that “something was missing”, young Audrey tried to live an early life that made sense in the midst of this confusing feeling (p. 13). She seemed to be on the lookout for something that would sooth her sense that “something [was] missing”. Audrey did this by grasping hold of a “big people” story script that she hoped would offer her a fuller sense of meaning, completeness, and perhaps a connection to her father’s story (p. 15). That is, she moved into a common story that many struggling adolescents often take for granted as the piece that will complete or rescue them from the pain of emptiness:

*When I say that, "I believe there was something missing or there was some reason why I always ended up wanting to know more about my other side of my family life", I think part of it was because I never really got to visit my father's side of the family as much as I wanted to until after I left home -- and I left home at a very young age.*

*I left home at fifteen, I quit school at fifteen. I actually got married when I was sixteen. When I think about it now, I think, "That was so young. Maybe that was --." I know now that if it was me or my son or my daughter, I'd be saying, "You're crazy. What are you doing?!"*

*It was just that there were eight of us in the family and my mom did teach school and we didn't have a lot of money or a lot of things that we felt we needed. A year after my dad passed away and we moved into the Elk Point town, I went to work. I made friends with this janitor at our school and they used to hire me to work. So before I was twelve years old I was working. Every night I used to go to the school and help them for two hours. As I got older it became more and more. During the summer when they did the big major cleaning at the school I used to work sometimes a month or six weeks with them.*



*I think I became independent very early, so by the time I was fourteen I thought I was grown up! (laughing). I just did the things that I thought I should be able to do as an adult. Probably because my mom was so busy, in a way I felt I was helping her, by that time I was buying my own clothing and doing those kinds of things that she really couldn't afford. So it seemed to be a way to assist her. She didn't have time to really spend with each one of us so I was busy, I was working, I was buying things, and I was going out and doing all those things that big people do (laughing).*

*By the time I was fifteen, I just left home, I decided one day -- I was in grade ten and I just decided, "I'm quitting school." My mom wasn't happy about it, I know she wasn't happy about it but it was sort of 'what do you do' kind of thing. So I left. I had one sister that was married that lived in Edmonton so I came to live with her.*

*I got a job right away and I started working. In the mean time I had met Gordon, and by the time I was sixteen -- I was sixteen in May and in July we got married. And I don't regret it. I mean, I think we did a lot of things, for the first four years of our lives it was just us, and we did things that I probably would have been doing either on my own or not. But I don't think I ever felt like I missed anything. I was a person that really liked sports so I played ball and I continued to do those kinds of things so it wasn't that I missed anything.*

*It was just that I wasn't happy any longer going to school. I felt too grown up compared to everybody else and I wanted to leave -- and I left (Audrey, p. 15-16).*

During my next research conversation with Audrey, she took me back to the issue of “marrying young” (p. 33). She wanted to carefully clarify her position on this complicated option that many young people prematurely take up. It was an especially complex issue for her to openly disclose since in hindsight, from her more current and experienced story of self, she seemed to recognize the challenges that often accompany attempting to prematurely write one self into an adult storyline:

*When I said I “married young”, and I forget how I said it, I think I said “I don’t regret it”, and I think what I meant is ...as a parent now you wouldn’t want to think your child was going to do that. You would shudder to think that, but at the time it didn’t seem wrong for me to do it. But now as a parent,*





*I would think, "Oh No!", so I'm not sure that I changed my thoughts in that other than to think as a parent I would view it differently (Audrey, p. 33).*

As our research conversations continued, Audrey seemed to reflect more deeply around the issue of "marrying young" (p. 33). Through the process of our conversations she seemed to be working at making further sense of this complex issue and what drew her towards this "marrying young" script. During our last meeting she admitted:

*I do truly believe that if my dad had lived, I don't think that I would have left home at 16 years old and been married. I think that somehow when there are two parents they have more time to spend with you and they have more control over the kids.*

*I saw my mom as a very busy person trying to look after eight kids and not really being able to be everywhere all the time. So we kids really went on our own and did what we wanted to do when we wanted to do it. I think that would have changed, I really think that would have changed.*

*Although I remember my aunt telling me that my dad's sister got married when she was 13 years old. And this was around the time that I got married very young. And she said to me, "Oh you could of got married a long time ago because aunty Maggie, (my dad's sister), got married when she was 13 and nobody thought that was wrong and look at how she lived a long life with her husband and they had six kids and they had a good life and so you could have gotten married when you were 13!" (laughing).*

*But I believe that would have been different, like my father would have -- not that my mother didn't have questions as to why I was doing it, but I think if there had been someone else there to support her there would have been a much stronger debate on it than we had...*

*My mom hoped for us kids to all go through school, like every parent I'm sure does. I always had very, very good grades, I think my mom thought, "Oh well, there's one that will go through school and do what I want her to do."*

*But I think as I worked and as I grew, I just found that there wasn't enough there for me. Once I made that decision to quit and move on -- I'd already met Gordon, I met him when I was 14 years old and I saw him on and off as*



*well as doing the things kids do at school -- but because he was older as well and he was more mature, there was more there it seemed than kids at school.*

*I was working I wanted to do things and I wanted to go places and I wanted to do more things than walk the street with the other kids or do things that kids do. And of course with Gordon, he had a car and we could go from Elk Point to St. Paul which was a big thing there because a lot of people never left the town basically. So I think that was part of the 'growing up faster', than the other kids.*

*Gordon worked all over Alberta on the pipelines so it wasn't like I was with him all the time when I was 14 because he'd be gone for months and then he'd come back. So it just felt like I needed to do more. So I made the decision that I was going to leave home and go to work.*

*My mom wasn't happy about it, she said, "Well what are you going to do?". I said, "I'll get a job." I don't think she had a concern in that area but she really felt like I was going to be the one who was going to go through school and that was more of a disappointment. I don't think she felt that I couldn't take care of myself it was just that, "Here is this young person and why aren't you going to finish school? It's so simple and you could!".*

*I left and came to work in Edmonton and I lived with my sister. I got a job right away and I took a training program in dry cleaning and that was how I started. Then Gordon's job moved right around Edmonton so once again I started seeing him. I think I just felt like, "Here is who I want to live with and here is who I enjoy doing things with." I quit school right after I turned 15 and then I worked in Edmonton for about a year before we got married.*

*I just felt like, "This is it, this is who I want to live with, this is who I can do the things I want with, I can work, I can go places, and I can do what I want to do." He was probably more mature, well he is -- Gordon's quite a lot older than me and he was more mature and he understood that I needed to do what I needed to do as a person, so I think that probably helped some too (Audrey, p. 66-67).*

It seemed another link to Gordon and the "marry young" script, was that Audrey sensed her father would have approved of Gordon as a suitable husband (p. 33). This seemed to provide her with a feeling of having pleased her father's spirit while acquiring a unique connection to the life-story her father had composed for himself. Likely this knowledge or impression seemed to sooth some of her feeling that



“something was missing” (p. 13). At any rate, choosing this script, from where she stood in her young story, seemed to make the most sense:

*Gordon's family lived down in the same area that we did. I remembered my dad always talking about Gordon's family. His family was really musical and they used to always have real Metis dances and functions out there. They had this country home and they used to -- New Year's is what I remember and I never got to go -- but I remember my dad talking about it.*

*Everybody used to go there and New Year's Day was the real function. They would start from about dinner time, their mom would start cooking and everybody around the whole neighborhood and the whole country would come and they would eat and then about supper time they would start dancing. Everybody would. His family and his cousins were all musical and they'd start playing the fiddles and the guitars and everybody just danced. At five or six o'clock in the morning they would still be dancing. It was just a tradition.*

*I remember my dad going. Maybe my mom went too, I can't really remember for sure if she went. But I remember him going and always talking about how great it was because my dad really loved dancing -- he used to call square dances. So to him this was really good.*

*I remember my dad talking about the Poitras family, he was really impressed with [Gordon's] family. He used to always talk and tell us about how, "There's all these boys over there!" So I kind of thought about that too, like, "I think my dad would like this. My dad would okay it. This is someone he respected." So I imagine now that that was probably in my mind, like, "Oh, he would accept this. He would really like this." So I think that was part of it (Audrey, p. 65-68).*



## Chapter Four

### The Painful Reality Of “Taking Things For Granted”:

#### *Living Life Without A Script*

The challenges and complexities of pursuing a desired life-story continued to unfold before Audrey. She was now part of a couple, a relationship, and this provided her with a sense of connection. Marriage, she said, seemed to enhance her story. During our meetings Audrey described her husband Gordon as, “one of my biggest supporters” (p. 28). However, as meaningful as the marriage seemed, it did not close the chapter on the challenges Audrey would deal with as she attempted to compose a more complete and meaningful sense of her self. Instead, the marriage only opened up new situations she would wrestle with in trying to figure out who she was going to be as a wife and a mother:

*Another important part of my life was -- after I had gotten married, and we had been married a couple years, we realized we probably weren't going to be able to have a family. So that became, for me, an issue just for the simple fact that everybody has family...like everybody has somebody and I won't have nobody.*

*So we both struggled with that for a while and we thought, "So what do we do about it?" ... I think I reflected as to how I felt when I didn't have a father, so it was like, "Now I need someone else. I need somebody else to have, to be mine."*

*I remember, for a couple years, thinking, "What will it be like? It's okay now not to have any kids because I work and we're busy ... but what will it be like later? I'm sure we will feel like we really have missed out on part of what life is all about." For a couple years we really struggled with, "Can we accept it or do we want to do something about it?" (Audrey, p. 38).*

*I used to think about, "Well, it's okay now not to have anybody, there's us, there's me and Gordon and we're so busy doing the things we do that it's okay*





*now but what about five or ten years down the road when everybody else has kids coming home and doing the things that parents do? What will we be doing?". So this was the sort of thing I wondered, will I be missing something? So that kept coming to me (Audrey, p. 40).*

Audrey did not have a script to inform her next move. She was faced with a painful situation and was forced to figure out how she might deal with this dilemma. The couple was truly living life without a script:

*[For a while we were] hoping that, "Oh well, somehow, some way it will happen." Then I guess we just finally realized that, "No, we have to accept it, we won't have any children." Then we had to make up our minds as to what we were going to do about it.*

*Now when I think about it -- you just take so many of these things for granted. You just don't really stop to think how it affects you as a person until it actually happens (Audrey, p. 41).*

Audrey realized and began to accept that she could not continue to live by the take-it-for-granted assumption that she would naturally conceive and bear a child. As she grappled with this dilemma she engaged in a self-reflective questioning process. She posed some very big and complex questions like, "should I be a mother?", "why do I want to be a mother?", and "how will I feel as a mother or not as a mother?". Responses seemed to surface around these envisioned possibilities. Her reflections then informed her action. She shifted away from hoping the situation would figure itself out. A subtle awakening seemed to occur through her process of deliberation. She clarified a vision for her self and then purposefully and actively pursued this vision:

*We had thought about it for long and we had talked amongst ourselves and we had talked to our doctors and we had finally decided we would do something*



*about it. [The process] gave us time to think about what we really wanted to do and how to prepare. It gave us a lot of time to think, to think about how it would change us. By the time [we adopted our son] it was like we had thought for so long we just knew everything was going to work and we knew how it was going to work. By the time he came we were prepared for him and we knew that was what we wanted to do and we had made the decision.*

*Because the process took so long, we kept saying to ourselves, "Well if we can't, what do we want to do? Do we want to go through life without kids?" Always the option came up, "Well, we could adopt." The more we thought about it, I think our attitude at that time was, "Well, there's nothing to lose. We don't have a child now and we're probably not going to and all we can do is try and if we get turned down, well, we get turned down. We'll never know unless we try!"*

*So by the time it came to be, we knew it was the right thing and we knew that it was what we wanted so it was good. I was working at the time and they phoned me one day and said, "You can look at him and see if you want him or not", which was really different. They phoned me at work and said, "Within a week we will have a child that you can come see at the social service office and we've matched him to you and all you have to do is accept him and he's yours." But it was different, it was like you could say 'yes' or 'no'! But we got there and they brought him in -- and he screamed! And we knew right from that moment -- "we're not going to say 'no'!"*

I was struck by Audrey's profound concern that she would "be missing something" by not having a child (p. 40). It seemed obvious that this pervasive feeling had understandably informed a significant part of her decision to adopt a child:

*I reflected upon how I felt when I didn't have a father so it was like, "Now I need someone else. I need somebody else to have, to be mine kind of" (Audrey, p. 38).*

*From the time he came to live with us, all of a sudden it was like, we have somebody and whatever we do there is always somebody there with us, there is always somebody to think about, there's always somebody there so we can think "Oh well, even when we're old they'll be there and they'll come home."*

*I'm sure that it is an important part of every woman's life to think that, "Somewhere down the line if I don't have children there will maybe just be me*



*and everybody else has somebody." So I don't think I found it hard to change from being nobody to being him. (Audrey, p. 41)*

Her words touched a chord in me and I felt compelled to explore this. I asked Audrey if she thought her concern that she might eventually, "have nobody while everybody else has somebody", was connected to her earlier feeling that "something was missing" from her sense of self (Audrey, p. 38 & 13). Her response seemed to verify that Audrey, in hindsight, did in fact engage in a process that involved consciously and purposely creating a desired envisioned future based upon disappointing experiences and feelings from her past. The learning and realizations she took from her old childhood story did seem to inform the way she chose to author her new unfolding story. She seemed to engage in a visionary process -- reflecting upon past regrets, reflecting upon future possibilities, and then taking active steps to create what she wanted:

*I don't really remember if what I thought at the time was, "Oh, it'll be like back then." I don't really recall thinking that. But I think there's always some reason why you think of things that you want to do ahead of time. It's usually because of something that has happened, this is my way of thinking about it anyways.*

*Usually when I'm bound and determined that I want to do something it's because there's something that I've done that I've felt I could have either done differently or done better or have something changed along the way. So yah, it is probably all connected.*

*I do think that I think that way. Like I said to you before, I don't just jump into things and do them. I think about things first, like, "Do I really want to do this? So what will happen if I do this and if I don't do this what will be different? Or if I do this, then I could do this!"*

*I believe I'm that way a lot, even to the extent that I want to really understand where it is I'm going to go, maybe because I don't want to have to come back and start over or I don't want to fail part way down the road. I want to have*



*that vision of, "If I do this, I'm going to do this, and I'm going to do this, and then I'm going to get there", even if it is going to take some time. So yah, I truly believe that is the way I am as a person. There are people who just do things and then afterwards say, "Oh, why did I do that! Oh no, now I have to go back and go and start in this other direction." But I think that I take more time to really think about, "So where will I go?" (Audrey, p. 41-42).*

It was challenging and painful work this creation of a more complete and fulfilling self. It was not neat and tidy. The process seemed to involve facing many difficult situations, which in turn brought forth equally difficult dilemmas and questions to be grappled with. Ultimately, with each challenge faced, there began a series of gradual awakenings, which each seemed to illuminate for Audrey the need to consider options, possibilities, and the importance of essentially acting out and creating a more enriching life. Audrey was beginning to envision for her self the possibility of filling in the “missing” in her own way (p. 13). Audrey was beginning to realize that she could in fact move her self out of an old unsatisfying chapter of her life, and into a new preferred storyline, constructed around the empowering belief that she could make her visions a livable reality.

On some level Audrey must have been conscious of her need to create the life-story she wanted for her self, rather than locating it in somebody else’s story, finding it ‘out there’, or by assuming she could live by the take-it-for-granted storylines. Audrey was gradually waking up to her need to create desired change for her self, rather than opting to live an empty meaningless old story in hopes that it would change on its own. No person or thing could change the feeling that “something [was] missing” for her (p. 13). She knew she needed to take action. This was a process she needed to author.





## Chapter Five

### Realizing “There’s Got To Be More To Life Than This”:

#### Waking Up To The Emptiness Of Living Within An Incomplete Story

Audrey’s adult years came to be characterized by sprinklings of gradual wake-up calls. Some of these experiences were painful, some confusing, and some thrilling.

Another significant twist of fate awoke Audrey to the opportunity to reconnect with her Metis side of the family and, in turn, to deepen her sense of her father’s life-story, in order to make more sense of her own:

*Not too long after I got married, when we first lived in Edmonton, we lived just down the alley from where my dad's sister and her family lived. Even though I never knew them I started to get to know them ...*

*One of the other things that happened was that right after I moved there, my dad's brother who was my godfather, came and he found me, he found where I was and so then me and my godfather got to know each other really well. He used to come to see me every time he came to Edmonton. Even up to, well forever, until he passed on, whenever he came to Edmonton he would always call me or come to see me!*

*I think that helped too, knowing that I did have that connection there, like I was one of the kids that got to have one of my dad's brothers as my godfather, so I think that was part of the connection too ... prior to that it was very difficult knowing he was there somewhere but not really knowing him (Audrey, p. 36).*

Reconnecting with her godfather and paternal aunt seemed to awaken Audrey to the possibility that she could in fact know more of her “missing” family story (Audrey, p. 13). She seemed to realize that she could go on living a story of



“something missing” or she could take hold of this opportunity to fill in some of what had felt lost (p.13). Audrey seemed to envision the possibilities and again took action:

*It seemed to me that I just wanted to know more and more. It was very nice when my aunt lived just down the block from me and we could over there and visit. She had a big family too, they probably had eight or ten kids and they were cousins of mine that I had maybe heard about or seen when we little kids but had never really got to know. So we got to know them really well and some of them I still see now. I think it definitely filled me with understanding.*

*I felt that a lot of times I wanted to know more about my dad but even my aunts didn't tell me all that I wanted to know. But I think the reality was that they were there, like whether they were talking about him or whether they were talking about somebody else, it was like "Well, there is a part of him here." (Audrey, p. 73).*

As exciting as this reconnecting was, Audrey's many questions regarding her lost family stories would not all be answered. She realized she would need to appreciate and accept the knowledge she could recover through these rekindled relationships, while recognizing that she would need to become more active in filling in what she could of the lost family stories:

*Even now there are lots of unanswered questions that I don't know about his family or that I would like to know about his family. I think that I've just come to accept that I'm probably never going to know... it's like those pieces probably are never going to be filled in. But I think I felt like at least I knew parts of him by knowing his brother and his sisters (Audrey, p. 37).*

Her aunt's storytelling opened up complex questions for Audrey. Hearing more about her father's life-story was a powerful experience in that Audrey's feeling that “something [was] missing” bubbled to the surface (p.13). Her sense of the



“missing” seemed to deepen her desire to know more and to use her found knowledge to reconstruct a fuller sense of self:

*I remember talking to my aunt after I started going back to see them and saying, "Oh boy, if we'd have known this when we were kids!". I don't know at the time what difference I thought it would have made. But I remember at different times when she would be telling us stories or talking to us I would say, "Oh gee, it would have been nice if we had known this as kids."*

*But even then I used to think, "What would have been the difference? What would we have done differently if we'd have known? Would it have changed anything we did, that would have then changed what we're doing now?". I remember thinking like that. I was always thinking, "Would that have made a difference if we'd have known this ten years earlier?" (Audrey, p. 65).*

The gradual awakenings continued on the heels of each challenge. Each experience seemed to grow forth from the last, pushing Audrey to consider that there really could be more to her story of self than the version she was currently living by. By now Audrey had thickened her sense of self by gathering some lost family stories.

Coinciding with her discovery of the lost family tales, was a series of challenges for the married couple. Health, career, financial, and social dilemmas came to the forefront for Audrey during these years. Eventually these challenges culminated in Audrey waking up one morning to the realization, “there’s got to be more to life than this!”(Audrey, p. 12):

*In about 1972 Gordon got sick, he was a welder, and he wasn't able to weld any longer. We had to decide what we were going to do because I had worked as a drycleaner all my life. So in 1972 we went to Fort McMurray and Gordon got a job as the welding instructor at Keyano College. But he was only able to do it for two years and then he had to give it up so we came back to Edmonton... then we needed to make a decision.*

*Gordon went for about two years of tests because his lungs had collapsed and they advised him to quit smoking and to get out of welding. Gordon was*



*undergoing a lot of testing to determine what he could and couldn't do. Once that was finished and the decision was, 'you can't weld', then we had to look at, "Well, what are we going to do?"*

*We decided ... that we would go into business for ourselves. We bought into two different drycleaners ... and we actually operated one for eleven years. It was a solution in that Gordon could come work along with me. That's what we did during that time that our son was growing up. He was part of that family business and he was there with us early in the morning and late at night. So that's what we did (Audrey, p. 16-17).*

*After eleven years, one morning we just woke up and said, "Gee, there's got to be more to life than this!". With a business of our own we worked six days a week and then on Sundays there were things like equipment that had to be fixed. We really didn't have any time! So we just decided, "There's got to be more to life than this!" We put the drycleaners up for sale and sold it (Audrey, p. 11-12).*

Even while caught up in a career quickly becoming non-sensical, Audrey was able to sense that she could take action regarding the absence of meaning in this career story:

*Our business was succeeding but if we wanted it to succeed we had to live it day and night. We had no other life. That is why we made the decision to get out of there.*

*It was like, "There's more to life than this! We have family, we have friends, we have the Metis community we want to be part of, we have all these things, and if we don't work the six or seven day weeks our business isn't going to succeed."*

*I think at the time I felt, "Now I've put myself in another rut here! I can work, and work, and work, and work and I'm not going to be happy ... so we have to move on to something else" (Audrey, p. 17-18).*





## Chapter Six

### Envisioning The Possibilities ... “I Can Do Better Than This, I Can Do Something About It, And I’m Going To Do It!”:

#### Constructing A More Complete Story Of Her Self

Once again, intentional action followed Audrey’s reflective and intuitive process. The dry-cleaning business was sold and the construction of a new more meaningful storyline underway. Yet again, Audrey’s process of noticing the possibilities encouraged her to pursue a new option that would better allow her to live by an envisioned future she more readily desired:

*We weren't really sure what we were going to do and at that time I saw this ad in the newspaper to upgrade your skills in finances. I thought, "Oh, this is challenging, so I'll go!"*

*I went and I took this condensed course at N.A.I.T., it was a three year program that had been condensed into one year, it was kind of a pilot project at the time ...I decided to apply for it and I took it on. At the same time that I was completing it Metis Nation was looking for a person to work in the Finance Department. Part of this program I took involved being given a place to go and work at because you had to put in an eight week practicum.*

*So I went to Metis Nation and I said, "I'd really like to provide my services for eight weeks -- free!" (laughing). So they said, "Okay, come and do it and if you fit when it's over you'll have a job -- but we can't guarantee anything."*

*"Well that's fine," I said. I was supposed to go to Coca-cola or somewhere like that, and I didn't want to go, so that was fine and school agreed with it since getting financial experience was what really counted.*

*I went to Metis Nation and by the time the eight weeks were over they said, "You've got the job if you want it." That's how I became full time and then from then on I stayed there and worked full time. Not very long after that they promoted me to an assistant in Finance as an assistant accountant. About a year after that our director of Finance left and when the competition came open I applied for that and I got it. I stayed there until I decided to run for [President}. So that was how I really got involved (Audrey, p. 12).*



By now Audrey's visionary spirit was strong. She trusted her sense and was therefore further inspired to put her envisioned plans into action. Her visionary process continued to shape the way in which she authored her life-story:

*During the first couple years [while working at Metis Nation] I felt I wasn't as involved with the Metis community as I should have been. In those first couple years it felt like, "Yah, we were doing things." And I was happy. But after that it got to where I would see, "So why aren't we doing this? Why aren't we doing that?"*

*That's when I knew there had to be more, that there was a better way of looking after Metis people than what we were doing. We had a lot of things happen in the organization...it wasn't being run efficiently ...and there became a very big battle within the Metis Nation for control ...it was like nobody knew what anybody should be doing ...everything just kind of fell apart ... nobody seemed to be there to move into that leadership role and it was very, very hard working here as an employee at that time.*

*I think that's what made me move to the place I'm at right now [as President]. As we went through those rough times I just realized, "There's so much more we can be doing that we're not doing and I could stay here forever and I'm not going to change anything anyway!". So that is where my discontent started, from saying, "Is this what I want to do? Is this where I want to stay, working here knowing that we should be doing these other things and we're not!" So that was where my decision was made and that's how I became president (Audrey, p. 17-18).*

\* \* \*

Audrey's series of gradual awakenings occurred in a multi-layered fashion, as life does. Coinciding with Audrey's visionary climb to President of the Metis Nation of Alberta, she was also actively exploring and authoring a fuller sense of her Metis identity. She had been first introduced to the historic Metis chief, Gabriel Dumont, during her early years at school. At that time this figure was more a name attached to a fleeting sense of vague importance. Back then, Audrey was sufficiently pleased just



knowing that she had some ancestral connection to this figure who seemed to bring her a degree of fame and recognition from her school peers. However as Audrey worked to create a fuller sense of who she wanted to be, she was enticed into investigating the inspiring story of Gabriel Dumont and the Dumont lineage:

*I remember we were at the archives. We had some old history on the Dumont side but we hadn't been able to fill in where Gabriel fit and where we fit. For a while we had this old history and we had some new history but we were missing the middle of how we connected.*

*We had some information from the archives in Manitoba brought over to the Edmonton archives, and we were going through that when we finally found how we were connected. I remember thinking, "This is how! This is how! I've finally figured it out!!"*

*It wasn't only me that was asking the question. Once we started doing the genealogy my aunts, uncles, and sisters were asking, "Well, how do we connect?" I had always been saying, "Well, I know we do connect," but now I was finally able to say, "This is exactly how!" That was the big piece that joined us. It was big piece of microfiche that came over from Manitoba that we were scrolling ... so it was the missing piece ... I was really excited and happy to finally know, "This is exactly the way it is!" (Audrey, p. 72).*

*The more I read about Gabriel Dumont, the more I would see, "Yah, I'm like this! I'm like this!" ... I have my vision of what he was and what he was like (Audrey, p. 21-21).*

*Without even realizing it to begin with but reading and hearing about Gabriel and thinking, "Yah, that's where I want to go, or that's what I do, or that's what I do the very same, or I want to do the same" (Audrey, p. 33).*

*As I got older and looked at who I was and where I had come from, and the more I knew about Gabriel Dumont, it all just seemed to connect that it was so very important. Probably not even knowing it at the time, but some of the decisions or trails that I took was because of that [understanding] (Audrey, p. 57).*

Audrey took further action towards filling in what was "missing" by organizing a Dumont family reunion (p. 13). She sensed this would be an important





part in the process of filling in the past so to better inform and shape her present and future sense of self. She trusted her instinct and followed through on bringing her envisioned idea to life:

*We had done reunions for Gordon's side of the family so when we said we were going to have our first Dumont family reunion, I said, "Well, we will just do it!". So I started the organizing for the Dumont reunion (Audrey, p. 23).*

*I started doing some family history on my Dumont side of the family... I'd just make time to go and look up through the microfiche to try to find more, and more, and more, to try to piece it together. Every time I found the name Dumont I wrote it down and I'd try to sort it through myself. I didn't know how to do genealogy properly so I just sorted it through myself and I'd just ask myself, "How could this person be related and what do I have to look for now?" (Audrey, p. 6).*

*I got the idea, "Gee, wouldn't it be nice to know all these Dumonts". Then I talked to a cousin ...and she said, "Yah, I've always want to!" ... So it was in 1987-88 when I finally started thinking, "Well, I'd better dig up some Dumont history"*

*We had the reunion in 1993 ... we had a really good time. We had a two day camp out down by an area by home, between Elk Point and Vermilion. We camped out to get to know each other. We tried to sort out how everybody was related. We built this big family tree, it was eight feet tall and four feet wide, and we tried to put everybody on it. We got there and I put it on the wall and then other people came and identified themselves.*

*It was very, very nice and very interesting. Even for the kids because we started making these big trees and color-coded them so everybody could see which generation they were. It was really interesting for the kids because they would find themselves and then they would try to figure out how they were related to their other little friend that they had just made! (Audrey, p. 7-8)*

This linking up with the Dumont lineage, and more specifically, linking up with Gabriel's story had a significant impact on Audrey. She recognized some of her own unfolding self-story in Dumont's life-story. She felt a camaraderie with the historic visionary Dumont. His was a parallel story of sorts that she could borrow inspiration and mentorship from. Ultimately, Dumont's story of being a Metis





visionary served to validate Audrey's commitment to the power of faith, possibilities, and living a life informed by vision:

*The more I read about Gabriel Dumont and the more I heard about Gabriel, the more I could really [understand] a lot of the decisions and the things that he did, that some people saw as wrong. I remember thinking to myself, "Well I would do that! I would still do that!"*

*So more I would look up things that he had done I would say, "Well man, there was nothing wrong with that! That's me, I would do that." Even now, more of course now because I'm there and I'm a person that's supposed to be visible and supposed to be in the limelight.*

*My friends will say to me, "You believe and that's what you believe and somebody has to prove to you why it's not right. You don't just accept what people say." I have a friend who says to me, "So you know when you read those stories about Gabriel Dumont, well that's exactly like you! You have your belief and that's what you believe and it's got to take somebody with a pretty strong sense of why you need to change to convince you that that needs to change." I do see that in myself. I do see that when I read things about Gabriel and they say, "He was stubborn or he was this or he was that."*

*I think that a lot of times, as women and maybe as Metis people or Aboriginal people in general, we have our beliefs but if people continue to push us we somehow back off and say, "Yah okay, it's alright."*

*I think I've just never been like that. Even as a kid, if someone said to me, "You can't do that," well I'd prove to them that I could do it whether I was supposed to be able to not. It was just that, "Nobody was going to tell me that I can't do that." So I think the more I read about Gabriel the more I would see, "Yah, I'm like this! I'm like this!"*

*Gabriel was a very sensible person. He believed in what you could do and he didn't believe in setting limits that were impossible. That's what I believe anyway. He was sensible but he was very committed. He was very confident that if he was going to do something he could do it. I think if he had had the ruling or the right to decide in some of the battles and the things that happened in the past, I think we would have seen a very different history then what we see today. Not to knock Louis Riel or anything but I think in some ways Louis was very compassionate and very thoughtful about everything else around him, whereas I think Gabriel didn't let things influence him. If he knew something needed to be done, well he did it and then he dealt with things as they came. He didn't let that influence his decision whether to do it or not, he did it and then he dealt with everything else as it came along.*



*I think that's where I say, "I see myself in that," and more than ever now as a leader here at Metis Nation. I could be so influenced to do nothing if I was that type of person because when you're dealing with a bunch of people that want to pull you in all these different ways, if you aren't committed to, "The reason I'm here is because I believe I can do something. I believe and I am committed to the people. I made commitments to the people that I was going to do something and so I can't let these other people pull me off or pull me back from it."*

*So I believe that is a very good trait, on my part, to have in this job that I have right now. I have to be able to be focused and able to say, "Yes, we do need to do this and some people may be unhappy but in the end I think they will realize why we did it."*

*I see that from the books I've read and just from different things I've seen and heard. I believe that Gabriel was about, "If we have to do it, we do it!". It's not that we don't worry about what the people think or anything like that but we deal with that as we go along, we don't let that stop us from doing it. So that's how I see him. I have my vision of what he was and what he was like (Audrey, p. 20-21).*

During this conversation, which took place in a boardroom at The Metis Nation, Audrey presented a beautifully hand-crafted "Dumont" family tree she had created. She unrolled the large chart carefully onto the long table and said, "I should show you my family tree so you can see where Gabriel fits into our family" (Audrey, p. 22). The tree was color-coded according to family generations. It was one of the trees she had constructed for the Dumont reunion. I asked Audrey who was involved in the idea of creating a family tree, and as evidence of her true visionary spirit she replied, "I was the only one who made the first one" (Audrey, p. 22).

I remember thinking what an absolute privilege it was to observe the great pride and joy she had so meticulously crafted for herself. Emotion seemed to bubble forth for both us. I even recall a shiver of goose bumps rising on my skin. Her own eyes watered gently, she gushed forward with the story of her family tree, all the



while swallowing back what must have been many years of emotion in the creation of an image that seemed to symbolize much of what had been missing:

*This is who my family is! This is my father, he went by the name of Sam, but his name really was Jean Baptiste Dumont (pointing to Jean Baptiste on the tree). And this is my mother, she was Mable Kinch. I'm here somewhere. Where am I? Oh this is me, right here! And my son Robert. And then we go like this, there is me (points), there is my mom and dad (points), there's their mom and dad. My dad's father was William (points) and his mom was Marie Deschamps. And then we go up here and -- so this would of been my great-grandpa another Jean Baptiste (pointing) and his wife and then his father was the Gabriel who was the uncle of 'the' Gabriel Dumont. So up there is Isadore, Gabriel Dumont's, mother.*

*This is the root of our tree (pointing to the tree trunk) and these were all of his [Jean's] kids, so this was Jean and these were his kids and so one was Gabriel and one was Isadore. This was 'the' Gabriel Dumont who was married to Madeline Welkey and his father was Isadore. So his father and my great-great-grandfather were brothers.*

*So my great-grandfather and Gabriel Dumont were first cousins! (Audrey, p. 22-23).*

Here I stood before years of effort, that culminated in, captured, and reflected back to Audrey a hand-crafted, hand-created essence of where her story of self came from and how this story came to be. She carried on this paper tree a narrative log of the long lost names -- and through a lifetime of experiences she carried the rich inspirational stories that belonged to these names. This paper tree represented some of what shaped her past, it also clearly shaped and informed who she wanted to become in her future.





## Chapter Seven

### Living By A “I Can Do Better Than This, I Can Do Something About It, And I’m Going To Do It!” Process:

#### *The Ongoing Process Of Creating A More Complete Story Of Self*

Throughout our research conversations, I encouraged Audrey to reflect on how she has continually worked to create who she wants to be. I challenged her to consider the process she engaged in. What experiences seemed to reflect this identity process? How has she been able to create a more complete sense of her self despite feeling there had always been “something missing” (p. 13) from her story of self? In hindsight, what stood out as meaningful life experiences that invited her to author her life-story in the manner that she did?

Her reflections deepened as our collaborative process of investigating her identity development unfolded. Initially she identified and reflected on specific experiences that seemed important in shaping her process. She closed our first conversation by stating:

*It’s been very interesting, very interesting ...when I get to that part of my life I think it really shaped who I was, even though I was already older. It was like I found where I belonged. Yah, it was knowing that I didn’t really know my family, knowing they came from the famous Dumont family but not really knowing a lot about them. And the more and more I got involved with the Metis Nation, I felt just like I belonged there.*

*So I think you could probably say there was more in those years that shaped who I was than as a kid because now when I think about it, I felt like I didn’t really know -- I felt like there was something missing -- like I didn’t know -- who I was ... it was like there always was something missing (Audrey, p. 12-13).*





By the time Audrey and I shared our second research conversation the notion of a visionary process was alive. Together, we noticed that she seemed to engage in an identity process largely characterized by envisioning alternate ways of being, reflecting on these possibilities and implications, trusting her sense, and eventually taking up determined intentional action. Her process of becoming who she wanted to be in her unfolding life-story did indeed seem to be about reflecting on the tough questions, trusting, and then acting on her sense that, “there’s got to be more to life than this” (p. 12).

*A lot of times I know what I feel I want to do ... I know what I want to see ... but it is very hard for me to just say to somebody, “This is what we should do,” because I have my own way of processing how that has to happen and it’s really hard to explain that to someone else. But, yah, a lot of the crossroads I came to in my life were because I did notice, “This is not the way it should be, it should be like this.” (Audrey, p. 19).*

*As you talk about it, and as I talk about it, it does become clearer that all the way along the line I really would think, “Well I could do this better, I could do that better, or there is something I could change, or there is something missing.”*

*I was a very shy person as a child ... it was always like I had to take all this time to build myself up to, “Yah, I want to be different, I want to do these things because it is going to be different.”*

*And now when I think about it, some of the things that I am doing now, I probably wanted to do ... way back then. But I felt like, “No, that’s too different. That’s too different from me.”*

*What I see myself doing is, before I ever do something I think a long time about it and I wonder, “Is this what I really want to do?” Because I do know that then when I finally decide that I’m going to do something, nobody is going to stop me (Audrey, p. 28).*

The notion of a visionary process grew stronger as I listened and asked Audrey about her experiences. Toward the end of our fourth meeting I checked this



sense out again with Audrey. Her response reflected her growing impression that in hindsight, and through the looking back research process, she did indeed notice evidence of her having envisioned the possibility of a more complete and satisfying self. The research conversations invited her to reflect on this process for the first time and in retrospect, as she held up the pieces of her storied life, she was able to see and acknowledge that she did strive to author a story of self in a conscious, coherent, more complete manner. Essentially, when the old story she was living felt too non-sensical and devoid of meaning, she created a new more meaningful script for her self:

*The more we talk, if you'd have asked me this the first time we met, the first time we talked, I'd probably have said, "No, that's not me at all." It's just that I don't think I really spent a lot of time thinking about who I am ... I don't think I've really taken the time to stop and think about it or talk about it ... I'm just too busy doing my thing. But the more we talk about it, the more I understand where you get that perception ... and as I look at it more, I can't find a reason for saying, "No, it's wrong". I have thought and I can't think of any better way of understanding it. I haven't been able to really think of anything that does speak to me any better (Audrey, p. 59-60).*

Clearly the research experience itself had been a self-shaping, transforming event. Even as she and I talked she was engaged in a process of discovering and making sense of how she became the person sitting before me on this particular day:

*I don't think I stopped to figure out myself -- why I do what I do, until now, because of our discussions I have to think about why I did do what I did ...*

*But now I know why I did what I did. When I look back at it I say, "Well yah sure, that's why I did that -- because of what happened." I think I've confused myself in some ways too ...but when [the storytelling] so clearly points to where I really see that I've made decisions to be [who I am], I say to myself, "How could I have not known?!". I must have known that was the way I had to go to get to where I had to go.*



*But the more I go along the road and everything falls into place, I look back and say, "Well this doesn't just automatically fall into place, there must have been something that made me decide to go this way instead of that way." (Audrey, p. 60).*

*When I look back now, it makes more sense to me why I did these things ... I see that when I got to a crossroads I would think "Okay, so now where am I going to go, what am I going to do?..."*

*To go back to the identity question, unless we truly identify who we are and why we do what we do, a person always kind of wonders, "So what am I doing this for?" And to me now, the more I look back at what has happened, it does become clearer and clearer to me why I am doing some of the things that I do. And I shouldn't just say, "for me or for myself," but for Metis people in general (Audrey, p.40).*

What a poignant indicator of how our identity process truly is a work in progress. It is a life-long endeavor, an ongoing creation process. It is more than a search, it is a wonderfully elaborate story of constant improvisation fueled by the conscious and courageous realization that, "there's got to be more to life than this" (Audrey, p.12).

*I'm surprised at some of the things that I'm doing in my life, but in other ways, when I look at it, I know that as a child, if I decided I was going to do something I was too stubborn to give up, it didn't matter how hard it was or what I had to do, I did it! That was just me, so in some ways I'm not surprised because as I look back over the things that I did to get where I am now, I think yes it was because I simply got mad at what was happening and said, "I can do better than this, I can do something about it, and I'm going to do it!" (Audrey, p. 58).*

\* \* \*

This has been a story about a visionary. It has also been a story about the implications of being embedded within many other stories -- silenced stories, missing stories, parallel stories, and re-discovered stories. But most of all, it has been a story



about one woman's life-long endeavor to compose a more complete and meaningful story she can live within her self, and tell about her self, as she envisions and creates who she wants to be as a Metis woman, wife, mother, daughter, niece, president, leader ...





CHAPTER SEVEN

NARRATIVES OF EXPERIENCE: AMY

ON BECOMING A TEACHER

*Surely the central task of education today is not to confirm what is  
but to equip young men and women to meet that change  
and to imagine what could be,  
recognizing the value in what they encounter  
and steadily working it into their lives and visions.  
(Bateson, 1989, p. 74)*

- ALL NAMES USED IN THIS STORY ARE PSEUDONYMS.  
THE PARTICIPANT REQUESTED THAT HER IDENTITY REMAIN ANONYMOUS.



## ON BECOMING A TEACHER

### Chapter One

#### Dissatisfied Wonderings:

#### *Growing Up Amidst Non-Accepting Stories*

Amy's childhood was threaded with stories of difficulty. Her early stories spoke of a pervasive feeling of not being accepted. She did not feel accepted and questioned whether she ever would feel accepted. Amy began our first research conversation by sharing her impression that, "a lot of people are driven from their past" (Amy, p. 2). I would come to understand that through this statement she meant that people are often shaped, influenced, or "driven" by the experiences they lived or survived through early in life. Or as David Carr explained, when abused, a person is driven from their past because they lack a personal history that makes sense, instead they are left with an incoherent story of self, essentially a void (1986).

As I listened to Amy's storytelling, I came to see that her own dissatisfied wonderings as a child seemed to be the force behind what "drove" her to take up a learning ... teaching ... learning lifestyle. A lifestyle that she sensed would ultimately facilitate her creation of a more accepting story of her self, while moving her away from the, "I wasn't acceptable", stories she initially lived by (Amy, p. 34).

\* \* \*



Amy was born and raised on the Beaver Lake Reserve in Alberta. She was the last child born into a large family. Her father was a Cree Indian farmer and her Metis-Cree mother went on to eventually become the Chief of the Beaver Lake Band. Perhaps of even more importance was the fact that Amy's mother was the very first female to ever hold this position in the province of Alberta! What a great achievement and family legacy!

Amy's memories of her family are fond ones. She described an especially deep bond with her quiet father. She explained that he was one of the many unfortunate who was forced to live at a residential school as a child. He lived with both the emotional and physical scars of these years. Amy seemed to carry an understanding of her father's pain, and through this, was able to make sense of the alcohol he frequently used to fend off his own quiet suffering:

*Even sadder was ... my father being in residential school, and being beat up and having all of these horrible things said to him like when the kids couldn't speak Cree. They had to speak English and he told us the story ... When we were about 13 or 14, we got [harassed] in Lac La Biche from the non-Native kids we went to school with about being Indian, but when we were on the reserve we got [harassed] from the other Indian kids because we couldn't speak Cree.*

*So when we were about 13 or 14 we were giving my dad a bad time and that was one of the first times I ever really saw my dad cry, the pain at our dinner table that night was just incredible. I don't think anybody finished dinner that night.*

*When he told us the reason, there was anger that came out. It was something he never wanted us to know. He never wanted us to know what he suffered through but he told us, he showed us his hands and his knuckles were huge and probably his hands had been broken with what they did with the yardstick ... they would turn the yardstick over on it's side and they'd hit them on the back of their hands.*



*He told us these stories about being abused in the school and when we look at it, when we talk about it, when we take a look at how my dad was, he was very quiet, he didn't talk to a whole lot of people, he was just a really, really quiet man and stayed to himself and then went and got drunk and was the happiest guy you would ever want to meet.*

*He probably was sexually abused at school and he just withdrew into himself. People always say abused people abuse again, but that never happened in our family, so I'm really grateful and thankful for my dad in the way that he didn't repeat that history ... He just became withdrawn and quiet because of all the pain that he had endured as a really young man.*

*He told us that when he was young, he often said to himself, "If I ever have kids, I'll never teach them how to speak this Cree language because I don't want them to be hurt the way I was hurt." But you know, he couldn't see times changing, he couldn't see how they would change ... (Amy, p. 53-55).*

Clearly, Amy's own childhood story was born into a historical legacy ripe with messages of non-acceptance. As I listened to her stories of early life, threads of pain, discrimination, and confusing oppression became increasingly apparent. Her suffering stories seemed to surface first as she attempted a beginning explanation of how she has constructed a more accepting and desired story of her self:

*I think a lot of people are driven from their past. I don't know how to explain that other than that a lot of their stories centre around a real abusive nature. The only abuse I suffered was being in an all white school that wasn't accepting of Aboriginal people.*

*I didn't know I was Native, Aboriginal, or an Indian until I got to school. So starting from about age six or seven that is when I found out that my name was Amy, and not Chuckie, because that's what I grew up being called, "Chuckie". So I had to learn a lot of new things ... I was this little person going off to school, it was like I was becoming a whole different person because I had to learn how to sort of struggle through not being accepted.*

*Whereas when I was at home I didn't know that the colour of my skin made that much difference to other people. But I found out that it did and lived with that and always wanted to look like the blond-haired, blue-eyed, fair-skinned girl.*





*And that was the suffering part I think, if there was anything I had to struggle through and deal with on my own – it was being just who I was -- Because I was never happy just being me. I always wanted to look like somebody else. I always thought that I'd be more accepted ... (Amy, p. 1-2).*

When I asked Amy how she came by the nickname “Chuckie” she shared another story that highlighted an early wish to be accepted. Through her childhood imagination she thought it possible to change her identity by adopting the name of an idolized family friend. Even at a pre-school age Amy seemed to carry a belief that being someone else would bring more acceptance:

*When I was a little girl there was a guy that came and stayed with us. His name was Chuck Morgan. And Chuck Morgan could play the violin, and he could play the guitar, and he danced, and he sang, and I just figured that if I had the name Chuck or Chuckie - and changed it to Chuckie - that I would be just like him and I would be able to do all these things. He was actually a tall skinny guy and I was kind of a tall skinny kid, so that kind of fit the bill, but I just thought that I would do all the things that he did, if I had his name (Amy, p. 26).*

Amy referred to the discriminatory experiences she faced at school as, “initiation by fire” (p. 40). She explained that before attending school, “I was just an Indian kid,” however once she entered the larger school culture she began to receive the message that, “I was a dirty little Indian” (Amy, p. 40). The painful and confusing treatment seemed to come from all angles. Amy recalled the verbal stings by a frustrated teacher who would yell at the Native children telling them they were, “useless, dumb, stupid, cabbage heads” (Amy, p. 12). Amy also told stories of being mocked by the other children:



*There was a bunch of kids holding hands together, skipping around and calling us Indian kids, "niche". It was like a song they would sing and nobody ever really stopped them. That was the day I came home and asked my dad what "niche" meant ... and he said, "It means friend." I said, "Then why aren't these kids treating me like that?" ...It was from that day on that I knew, I just knew that I didn't belong there. I didn't feel like I belonged and I often wondered if I ever would (Amy, p. 42).*

Amy grew up around these non-accepting stories. Despite the safe and welcoming environment at home, she was faced with the kinds of messages that subtly and not-so-subtly chip away at a person's sense of a valued self. Not surprisingly, Amy eventually gave in to the influence of these impoverished stories. To push back against them seemed to require so much she was not prepared or able to muster while so young and inexperienced. Amy began to quietly live next to these oppressive stories, she even bought into some as very unfortunate self-truths:

*I could never hide from being Native, I wasn't as lucky as some of my girlfriends that had really fair skin yet they had nice dark hair and they could kind of hide. There were a lot of hurtful times in my life. But one time a girl I considered to be one of my best friends in high school told me, "If you ever tell anybody that I'm Native, I'll never be your friend again." I remember thinking those are pretty strong words and I remember suffering over it because in high school people were going out and being invited to parties. The only reason I got to go to any of these things was because I was their star volleyball player or their star basketball player and I had to be invited -- and that was the only reason that I was. I always really wanted to just be accepted for me (Amy, p. 9-10).*

It was a difficult first chapter for this student of life, but it was experiences such as these that carried the seeds of justified anger and equality that eventually encouraged Amy to re-write a more accepting story of her self. It was her dissatisfied wonderings that invited forward a keen interest in learning ... teaching ... and



learning more about the stories that she, and in turn other Aboriginal students, could internalize and live, with self-pride:

*When I was just a little girl growing up, I never wanted to be me when I looked into the mirror. When I would see little girls that had really nice blonde hair and blue eyes and really fair skin, I always wished that I could be them. I never wanted to be who I was because I wasn't acceptable ... so that was a struggle, I always struggled with who I was and what I looked like because I thought if I had blonde hair and blue eyes, and didn't have this funny accent that I have, or if I was from a rich family, things would be so much easier ... I always struggled with being me ... that was my biggest struggle as a young person - as a teenager growing up (Amy, p. 34).*



## Chapter Two

### The Initial Shaping of a Budding Teacher:

#### Experiences Which Nurtured Her Story of Self

The initial shaping of a budding teacher can often be traced back to the early years. Likely this has something to do with vivid recollections teachers often carry of having been deeply affected by interactions during their own school days. Teachers can often share stories that speak to the critical moments or situations that opened up their life-story to the learning ... teaching ... learning more lifestyle. Sometimes these stories are painful ones. Often times they are warm stories that highlight important nurturing, rewarding, and esteem-building experiences from youth. In some way though, a teacher's early stories will almost always hint at how they were invited to take up a storyline that encouraged them to seek knowledge, skill, and a stronger belief in their sense of self.

\* \* \*

Every teacher is first a student. Amy recalled vivid and significantly shaping experiences while she was a young life-student. She emphasized that, in looking back, her construction of a preferred story of self was initiated and highly influenced by the learning she did within the nurturing relationship she shared with her father and through the esteem-building experiences she shared with various sports coaches and teachers.

During our first research conversation Amy stated that, "remembering the stories my dad told me was a real revelation for me". She went on to explain that her





father was an important teacher and storyteller in her life. Amy recalled, “spending most mornings with my dad, just watching and listening ... just spending time alone with my dad, listening to him talk about different things ...” (p. 6).

During our second meeting Amy handed me a paper she wrote for a Native Studies class she had completed at the University of Alberta. She titled the paper, The Stories of My Father. Within this paper Amy re-told a beautiful story her father first shared with her when she was very young. She referred to this story as, “The Creation Story”, for it was the story of how the spirit *Wesakechak* created the world after a great flood with the help of the animals. Within Amy’s paper she discussed the powerful role her father played in providing her storytelling comfort during her early years and, once he had past on, how remembering his stories offered her “healing ... like good medicine” (The Stories of My Father, p. 6). The nurturing memories continued to connect her to her father’s spirit:

*My memory takes me back to when I was still in grade school. My dad was predictable. Starting about the middle of April, at about 6:30 a.m. every morning I would find him sitting outside on the doorstep, just sitting. He would motion to me with his hand to sit by him. I remember snuggling in close to him with his arm around me. I could see my breath. I would look up at him and whisper, “What are you doing daddy?” He would say, “Watch.”*

*As we sat together in the chilly morning air, we would hear the loons and the ducks chattering on the lake that was just three hundred yards away from our house. Usually the lake looked like a mirror. It was like looking at two skies. As we watched and waited on the sun to come into its fullest, I always wondered why daddy did this. We would wait until we could feel the warmth of the sun. He would always say something in Cree, then we would get up, go inside, and eat breakfast. I never really understood why he liked to watch the sun or what it was he said, it was just what my dad did. It is only now that I understand ...(The Stories of My Father, p. 2).*



Amy's father was an inspiring and shaping teacher in her life. His storytelling offered comfort, guidance, and validation, nurturing in her a budding sense of a valuable and acceptable self.

\*       \*       \*

Various school teachers and athletics coaches played a positive role in Amy's early life-story, and by doing so, considerably shaped her budding sense of self. She admired and appreciated these characters:

*When I was in grade one, I had this great teacher ...she was just an absolutely beautiful woman and it was back in those days when they would wear a fitted dress with those crinolines and I don't even remember her facial features, but I remember the dress that she was wearing, it was one of these dresses that fit her really nice around the waist and ... I just thought that she was gorgeous and ... I always thought my teachers were so smart because they knew everything and so I thought that if I was a teacher, I would look like her for one thing and I would know everything!*

*So I always wanted to be a teacher! So absolutely every chance that I got, I was always teaching my brother, or if we were playing, I always got to be the teacher. So that's what I meant when I said I was always the teacher, I was growing up teaching people (Amy, p. 30).*

Through these mentors Amy came to understand the healing nature of experiences that validated, acknowledged, and enhanced her esteem. Even in her childhood play she practiced sharing this 'learned' sense through a teaching lifestyle! In turn, she began to develop a desire to share the satisfaction of acceptance, guidance, and pride with those around her. Her gradual draw toward a learning ... teaching lifestyle was beginning to grow. Through these nurturing student-teacher relationships she began to develop a budding sense of acceptance:



*In grade 8 my best friend was ready to quit school and I was thinking along the same lines. I never even thought about getting to grade 12 ... I didn't know what I was going to do but probably I would have quit school except that my phys-ed. teacher asked me to play on the volleyball team.*

*I remember most white teachers didn't talk to Indian kids at school so when he came and sat in front of me I looked around ... and thought, "He can't be talking to me!" That was how I felt about everything, I really did, I remember just turning right around thinking, "There's got to be some white kid standing behind me because he wouldn't be talking to me." But he was.*

*And I didn't even know I knew how to play volleyball. I just knew it was a fun game. Then I just snowballed from there because I had already been playing fastball with my family and then basketball season came right after volleyball. And when we went into it in regular phys-ed program, I was here on the volleyball team, so just naturally it became, "You have to be on the basketball team." That became the sort of thing that I couldn't wait for, I couldn't wait for volleyball to be over so we could play basketball. That's the reason I stayed in school (Amy, p. 11-12).*

Whether it was volleyball, basketball, or baseball, Amy learned more than the sport, she began to learn that she was capable and more than "acceptable" (Amy, p.34):

*I remember getting up to the plate, going to bat, and standing there to bat in the batter's box thinking, "Oh my god, my coach has more faith in me than I have in me! So I have to do this!"*

*My coach would say, "Okay, you have to lay this one down ..." And I would think, "Be still my beating heart", because I wanted to do well ...*

*I think when you've got faith and you put trust in kids, they just rise to the occasion. I think with coaches doing that for me, they saw, and I couldn't see my capabilities, but they saw my capabilities, what I was capable of doing and they never for one minute doubted me (Amy, p. 9).*

*I played so many sports and it's what held me in school, it's the reason that I am where I am today ...if it hadn't been for sports ... I don't know if I would have finished school ... I don't even want to think about where I would have been had this teacher not come along (Amy, p. 38).*



These early relationships with people who took the time to teach Amy, believe in Amy, and encourage Amy had a life long impact. For it was the healing acceptance she experienced in these relationships that infused in her early sense of self a budding belief that she could be more than “unacceptable” (Amy, p. 34). The idea was planted. However, like most students of life, it would take some further life-lessons and learning before Amy would be truly ready to live by a story based on self-pride ...





### Chapter Three

#### Living What Seemed An “Expected” Story:

##### *Her Struggle to Compose A Story of Self That Made Sense*

Amy yearned for acceptance. She yearned for a story of self that made sense in the face of feeling she “wasn’t acceptable” (Amy, p. 34). These dissatisfied wonderings were likely what lured Amy into taking up the common “marry really early” script (Amy, p. 3). Even though she seemed somewhat unsure of this script her self:

*I wanted to be more accepted ... so I ended up getting married really early because -- I really don't know why. When I think about why I got married at 18, I guess it was because I sort of had a feeling that I was probably in love with my husband (Amy, p. 3).*

At the young inexperienced age of eighteen, Amy likely hoped that moving into the marriage script would satisfy a sense of acceptance. Societal and familial messages around her soon swayed her into taking up the additional “have children” script (Amy, p. 49). Amy was living what she thought was an “expected” story of self, in the hope of being “acceptable” to those around her (p. 49):

*We were married for over three and a half years ...and my dad kept asking me when I was going to have kids and I sort of felt like I was a kid. I didn't really know why I didn't want to have children right away, I just knew that I didn't. I don't know, I don't know if I was even ready. I know that we eventually decided and it took me a little while to get pregnant ...It seemed like there was a certain period in life when I guess I was married long enough, people just expected me to have children. I don't even know if I was ready, but I'm sure glad that I have them now (Amy, p. 49).*



However, it was not long before this seemingly “expected” script began to unravel in painful and unexpected ways for Amy (p. 49):

*When I became pregnant with [my second son], my ex-husband and I were already starting to have marital problems. It was mostly over sports because I wanted to play fastball and he didn't want me to, he didn't want me to work, he didn't want me to have friends. He just wanted me to stay at home and be a hermit and wait for him to come home from work. I really felt confined. So that was the start of it and after my second son was born I left. It was probably the most turbulent time of our life. He beat me up and I left. (Amy, p. 49).*



## Chapter Four

### Learning Life Lessons ... “A Rough Go” And “Real Struggles”:

#### *Living Life Without A Script*

It was a difficult learning time for Amy. It was also a scary time for her because, like many other women, she did not have a map or script to follow. Living by the “expected” scripts of those around her had proved untenable (Amy, p 49). Amy came to realize that despite her fears, she needed to figure her way out of this oppressive marriage script in order to create a personally acceptable life for her self that made more sense:

*I went back to him ... we were together two months and I realized that I couldn't stay with him and that was really scary. Then when our divorce hearing was coming up ... he beat me up four times. So that ended all that. And it was a whole other struggle because he figured that if he didn't support me or the boys, if I had nothing, then I would go back to him. That was a rough go ... (Amy, p. 50).*

It seemed like Amy then shifted her self into the ‘make-it-up-as-you-go’ years. Now, rather than living by what those around her expected, she was left to figure out what she expected and desired for her own story of self. She was truly on her own in a scriptless place in life.

She was a twenty-eight year old single mother with two young sons. She had budding aspirations of becoming a school teacher, but in being so influenced by the past, she questioned whether she was acceptable enough to pursue this dream:



*I decided to go back to university ...I often thought that I would really like to go to university and do something other than be on the farm ...I had somebody help me with an application form and I was not even thinking that I'd be accepted and I was! So then I had to decide ... then I moved to Edmonton on a university transfer program from Red Deer ... I went into the Faculty of Education (Amy, p. 51-52).*

Amy had few material resources during these challenging years, instead she relied heavily on her personal resources, those being her growing resiliency, determination, and ability to improvise. However, despite her best efforts some situations became impossible to manage while juggling so much on her own:

*It was a real struggle ... I was going to university early in the morning and [my oldest son] had to let himself out three times a week. He couldn't tell time so he had to wait for the 'birthday song' and then he knew it was time to go. He'd get picked up in front of our place. There was a birthday song played on the radio ...so the radio would go all day because that was the only way he would know when he had to leave the house.*

*There were times that he'd come running back to the house because he'd forgotten his book or he didn't get his mitts or he forgot his key. It was such a hassle. Then one night my car wouldn't start and I remember telling him when he got home from school, "Don't answer the door, and don't answer the phone, if you're going to watch television. make sure it is quiet so the neighbors won't hear because if they found you here alone ..." I couldn't afford babysitting, I was already paying for [my youngest son] to be in daycare.*

*So here I was thinking to myself, "Please, please you can disobey me this one time and answer the phone!!" But he didn't. So I phoned my neighbor and she went over and I said, "He'll come to the door and listen, you're going to have to tell him that it is okay, tell him that I said it was okay for him to open the door!" And he did. But my neighbor said she had to tell him about three times ... and there I was with my baby and my car, stuck on campus ... so that was a struggle (Amy, p. 51).*

*So [the boys] went back to live with their dad until I was through university. That was another struggle for me. The boys were only going to live with their dad until I was through university but by then, three or four years had gone by, and they had become really comfortable living on the farm (Amy, p. 50).*





## Chapter Five

### Living What Seemed A “Normal” Story:

#### A Similar Story With a Different Character

The difficult life lessons continued. The difficulty of living life without a script certainly had its challenges. Amy eventually caught her self repeating and re-living another old, yet familiar, chapter. That is, she discovered she had written her self back into a relationship story that shared what felt like “normal” similarities with other relationships experienced in her life (Amy, p. 7):

*I was living with a man at the time that I was engaged to be married to, he was a white guy, and he drank a lot. But he was a lot of fun. And this goes back to the same thing I had with my dad, with him being a real fun guy ... (Amy, p. 4).*

*My dad had already been dead for a long time. I think the reason I liked Roger so much, even though he drank, is because I missed my dad so much. My dad was such a fun guy to be around when he was drinking and so was Roger (Amy, p. 24).*

As I listened to Amy talk about her relationship with this partner, it occurred to me that in some ways she had taken up a similar story with a different character. It also occurred to me that sometimes we may need to go around a couple of times in order to really figure things out. Although painful, perhaps this is sometimes necessary in order to grow, learn from, and work through our own unique and necessary life lessons:

*My dad wasn't a mean guy, not at all, and Roger was. That was one of the reasons I dumped him. Roger had been like my dad in that he was just a really fun guy but ...there was a real fine point that Roger would cross and*



*then he would become really mean. But I always felt that Roger was almost part of my dad, but different too ... (Amy, p. 24-25).*

For Amy, this painful learning process seemed to facilitate the breaking down of her old story, while making space for the creation of a new and desired sense of her self:

*I finally realized that there was a big difference between us. Roger mocked Aboriginal people and culture. He said it was all this "New Age" stuff and that Aboriginal people were trying to make money off of it. That hurt and the more he said about Aboriginal people, the easier it was for me to leave. It made the leaving part a lot easier because he became so hurtful.*

*One of the last things he said to me was when he was drinking and we were at a party at his family's place, and he made this grand announcement, that he had the ninth wonder of the world. Well, I thought this was going to be something really nice. He said, "I have the ninth wonder of the world!" And somebody said, "What's that, Roger?" And he said, "An Indian that doesn't drink!"*

*That went right through the core. It was the one that I really remember the best. It was one of the things that made the decision for me. I had to leave the relationship even though in some sick way I was actually in love with the guy.*

*I think a lot of that was because of what I suffered through and had to endure at school, so that was no different, it was normal for me to be experiencing that, and so I thought that was normal (Amy, p. 6-7).*



## Chapter Six

### Realizing “There Was Something Better”:

#### Waking Up To The Destructiveness Of Living Within A Non-Accepting Story

By now Amy had gathered some important learning, she had shifted more deeply into a learning lifestyle. More specifically, she gradually came to realize that she was deserving of a more accepting story of self, and that only she could compose this story of her self. Ultimately Amy understood that she would need to take active steps to create a desired version of a life-story:

*I spent time with my sisters and with people who cared about me. My brother-in-law is non-Native and I spent a lot of time with him, talking to him about the kinds of things that were happening with Roger, and finding out that this wasn't normal. So I knew there was something better (Amy, p. 7).*

Amy recognized that by gathering knowledge and experience she seemed to strengthen her sense of self. She acted on this growing awareness by taking up opportunities to learn more about her Aboriginal culture and history. Amy began listening to and learning from the Aboriginal Elders around her. They told her stories that reminded her of the nurturing and guidance she experienced with her father. She was awakened to the possibility that she could live with a sense of pride, rather than self-loathing. She began to live by the belief that “there was something better” (Amy, p. 7):

*I believed all the stories that our teachers told us, that the Aboriginal people were heathens and that they believed that there were other kinds of Gods and of course when you go to church you're told all these things. So after that I was kind of ~~afraid of~~ my own people.*



*And so when I started [listening to the Elders], it was almost like a growing happened inside of me, because my thoughts were, "Why did they tell us that? Why did I believe that?"*

*So when I talk to young people about the sweat lodge, and it being like a rebirthing, that's how I felt. I felt like I was reborn and I came back. And it was actually after that that I really started to look at my relationship with Roger and that was the beginning of the end for us (Amy, p. 28).*





## Chapter Seven

### “Learning About ... All The Wonderful Things I Actually Had To Offer ... And Then Teaching It ... Was Like Coming Full Circle”:

#### *Constructing A More Accepting Story Of Her Self*

Amy constructed a more accepting and pride-informed story of her self by engaging in a spiraling process of learning ... teaching ... and learning more. She activated this process of becoming who she wanted to be by taking steps to explore, and to essentially develop, a sense of what it meant for her to be a proud self-accepting Aboriginal woman. As she worked to construct and compose this sense for her self, she deepened and authenticated her developing meaning of a proud Aboriginal woman by going out and teaching her growing understandings to others. This process spiraled out, thickening her sense of self with each learning ... teaching opportunity. And as with all true teachers, by coming into knowledge, more questions and curiosities bubbled to the surface for Amy, giving way to a quest for further information and self-shaping learning experiences.

Amy's initiation into this learning ... teaching ... learning more lifestyle began like this:

*I went to work for the Canadian Native Friendship Centre as a secretary receptionist. Through that they had a week long training in Banff where we were going to learn more about Aboriginal culture. People at work started telling me, "Ahh, these guys are kind of nuts with the stuff that they do. They hug each other and they burn sweet grass." I remember thinking, "Oh, well that sounds interesting!" ...so we went.*

*I met an old man there by the name of Eddie Bellerose. He's an Elder ... he sat down and taught about the Sacred Circle and about sweet grass and*



*Aboriginal people -- it was probably the very first time in my whole life that I was really proud to be who I was (Amy, p. 3-4).*

*The very first morning I walked into this room ... and there was a candle in the middle of the floor, an eagle feather, and some sweet grass. I knew it was sweet grass because I had seen it before but I had never used it before. We were invited to sit down and we were told what we had to do. Eddy started to talk and teach to us. I got a funny feeling ... it was like I was the only one in the room and he was just talking to me ...*

*I had spent years looking for some place that I fit in, or that I was needed, or felt like I belonged, I just wanted to belong someplace ... nothing ever felt right. And that morning when Eddy Bellerose was talking, it was like the lights were on ... it felt like I was all lit up inside ... it was like all the energy he was talking about was on me ... I felt like I was sitting hovering above the floor, where nothing was hard and I wasn't uncomfortable.*

*It was just perfect ... all I did was spend time alone thinking about what Eddy talked about ... every morning I would show up early so I could spend some time with him asking questions ... I was like a huge sponge ... I wanted to have this knowledge and I wanted to have more. So that was the beginning for me ... it was right and I belonged and nothing else seemed to matter after that ... (Amy, p. 27).*

*I learned all about sweet grass and I remember telling Eddie that I wanted to learn more about this, and he reminded me so much of my dad because he didn't answer me right away, he sat there and thought for a while and then he said, "Well then, I think you should teach it". And I thought, "This old man is crazy -- because he expects me to teach something that I know nothing about!". And that's what teaching is really all about! But it's come full circle for me because that's where I started ... (Amy, p. 5).*

*That was the start or the beginning of change for me -- because I didn't really like white people, I never ever said that, even though I had married one. But I guess it was because of what had happened while I was in school and how I was treated by a lot of non-Native people. So I really had a strong dislike of them. I actually went through that and I spent a lot of energy disliking and hating other people who didn't look like me. That was part of my misunderstanding ... ignorance on my part in having dislike for non-Native people. I spent way too much time and energy with a negative response to most of them. When I learned about that, I just wanted more. It was a real growing period for me (Amy, p. 3-4).*



Her spiraling process was now well underway. Amy acted on her desire to flesh out further meanings and understandings in order to construct who she wanted to be as a person. More specifically, she took up opportunities to thicken her sense of self-pride. She then reinforced and authenticated the learning she was doing by sharing and teaching her growing understandings to Aboriginal people in the community around her:

*When I started to learn more about my culture, where I came from, and all the different things that happened historically, I kept asking, "Why?". I began remembering the stories my dad had told me. That was a real revelation for me ... I went forward in learning more about Aboriginal people.*

*I got a job at Sacred Circle, which is a Native program that does a lot of counseling and programming for Edmonton Public Schools. Working for them was an added bonus in that I learned more about Aboriginal people.*

*I was counseling young people and making home visits and school visits and finding out the problems ... it made the connection with the school, it let our parents know that there was somebody there, it was kind of like a lifeline for them so that they knew their kids weren't alone at school. I made it really clear that when their kids were at school, they could get involved. I'd go in and say, "You can get involved. You can say something if you don't like what the teachers are doing or what the kids are doing, you have a right to speak up." It was about trying to break down those barriers that our Native parents felt (Amy, p. 4-5).*

Amy's process of learning ... and then teaching, from her strengthening sense of self, eventually gave birth to further questions, and then conscious and purposeful action so to build upon her understandings, and therefore reinforce more richly her sense of an acceptable and authentic self:

*It came full circle for me because that is where I started to teach, I began by teaching about the Sacred Circle. I figured, "Well, I could start with the grade three kids because they won't be able to ask me any questions that I won't be able to answer because they are only grade three kids", (laughing),*



*but wow was I wrong! So I would always just tell them, "Well, I don't know that, so next time when I come back I'll have an answer for you."*

*They'd ask the darndest questions and I'd go away and spend a lot of time with Elders, and a lot of time with my family, and going to sweats, and going and doing all the things I needed to do so that -- I guess I thought I could be a much better person (Amy, p. 5).*

This enriching process shaped Amy. She began to live her life by a more acceptable, confident, and self-sufficient story. In living a life informed by this stronger and proud sense of self, Amy was able to make difficult decisions that would further authenticate her more than "acceptable" sense of identity:

*I worked with Tom at Sacred Circle ... we got married ... I did a lot of learning with him. He and I are no longer married, it was a very short marriage ... we were only together five months. But lots of things changed for him. He said he no longer wanted to work, he figured he had me and I could go to work and he could go gambling.*

*I did learn a lot from him and when I teach kids about the Sacred Circle, it was he and I who sat down together, he did the teaching and I filled in the blanks with what was right for me, what I learned, and what I experienced.*

*When I was working and we were together, living together and then getting married, I often thought that I couldn't do any of this on my own. There was fear in thinking, "Oh my God! What if I have to stay in this relationship because I can't do this on my own?!"*

*I had to make that step. From having to go out and talk to Elders, because he did most of the speaking, so I did a lot of the learning sitting in the backseat, it was scary thinking that I had to go do this alone.*

*I made all kinds of mistakes going out alone, but thank goodness for our Elders and the way they never criticize anybody for making mistakes. They let you stumble around and learn from that. That is what I did for the first six months of having to go out and do these things alone.*

*But I didn't want to be with Tom and I thought if I don't do this, then I'm going to become almost handicapped in needing a partner that's going to go out and do this for me. When I talk about things like this, it all comes back to*





*sports because nobody was going to go to bat that ball for me. I had to go up there and do it ... I didn't have anybody else to depend on.*

*I realized if things are going to get done and get done right, then I have to rely on me. I think that was the whole lesson of learning for me when I asked Tom to leave because I knew I was going to have to do this on my own and that was really scary (Amy, p. 58-59).*

\* \* \*

Amy continued living by this spiraling process of learning ... teaching ... and learning more. She ventured out on her own and opened her self-story up to the learning and growing sense of self-acceptance she could create by receiving sharing from her Elders. Her self-story continued to be challenged and, in turn, enriched through this process:

*Bob Cardinal is another fellow I learned from ... he doesn't call himself an Elder, but I think that he is ... so wise for his age ... and he knows so many wonderful stories. He gives a rock to all the kids that he ever meets with ... he uses one student in the class and it's usually the student who needs it the most.*

*I'll always remember the time I met Bob Cardinal, he was invited to a sharing circle, it was part of Edmonton Public Schools and part of Family Social Service and we were all together at Poundmaker Lodge. It was the very first year that I wanted to go to the Sundance and it was another, "Oh my god, if I go there, I'll have to learn some more!" It was the end of the year and I wasn't sure I wanted to learn more or make that commitment and I was really afraid of what I might see ... it was like being pulled apart and not knowing should I go or should I stay and I just couldn't decide.*

*So anyway, when I went to this sharing circle I still hadn't decided whether I wanted to go or not. Bob got up and he had a stick that I still have in my car and he told a story about what he had to do as a young man, and then with his children, and he said he was going to give this stick to someone. It was a stick that helped him decide on different choices that he had to make for his kids and what he needed to do for them ... it was what he learned from his grandfather ...*

*So there I was sitting in the circle and I was thinking to myself "Oh please don't give me the stick because I don't know what to say." He came and he*



*stood right in front of me and I thought, "I'm never going to do this again, please don't do this!"*

*And he was just absolutely wonderful because I was sitting in the circle and I had my head down and I thought he wouldn't see me ... and it got really quiet and ... when the noise of his walking stopped close to me, I opened my eyes and I saw these feet right there! I wanted to laugh and I wanted to cry!*

Bob Cardinal handed Amy the symbolic stick. She explained to me that this sharing gesture carried much meaning. It was the symbolic support that encouraged her to attend the Sundance and carry on with her learning and self-shaping process:

*I went to the Sundance ... I have no idea to this day why I was so afraid, it was something new and something unknown which is always so fearful ... So when I got this stick, I walked away that morning and I thought, "There's a message here for me." That was the first thing that came to me ... when I took the stick ...it was that instant feeling of a release ... energy ... a peaceful thing ... then I got excited about going to the Sundance (Amy, p. 60-62).*

These types of experiences that Amy shared with her storytelling father and teaching Elders, influenced more than the process of how she constructed her sense of self, they also influenced who Amy became as a teacher. More specifically, Amy took the teaching she experienced through these self-shaping encounters and, in turn, modeled and shared the same values, knowledge, and stories with those she eventually went on to teach:

*What I learned through all of the stories that my dad told me and all of the things that our old people teach us, is that if we were to share more, we wouldn't be in such a destructive world or society. That's my opinion and that is what I teach the kids too (Amy, p. 21).*

Amy, in turn, lived out this sharing belief with more than the school children, she also shared her exciting new stories of self with her curious family members.



However, this situation of learning ... and then teaching to her older relations brought about what felt like an awkward internal dilemma for Amy:

*I would go home and of course I would be bursting at the seams to tell my whole family about this new life ... I was so happy in being where I was and so I wanted them to be that way too. So I shared with them and then I always felt really bad because I was the youngest in the family and I was teaching the older people in my family. So I felt kind of bad (Amy, p. 29).*

Amy felt “uncomfortable” in the traditional teaching role with her inquisitive family members (Amy, p. 39). She dealt with this dilemma by modeling what she had learned from her own teaching Elders. That is, Amy modeled the respectful sharing of personal experiences and stories in the same fashion that the Elders had taught her. In doing so, Amy was able to teach from, and live by, a continuation of her growing sense of self-acceptance and pride:

*It is sort of a given that we learn from our Elders and so it seemed funny ... uncomfortable when my older sisters would ask ... I would think I wasn't doing the right thing ... But I was actually just sharing, I was so excited about what I was learning and doing and I wanted them to have it too ... I was learning so much from our old people and they were doing all of the teaching, then I would leave there, I would see my family, they were all older than I was, and then I was doing the teaching.*

*So what I did was I changed it into telling them about the things that I experienced, so it wasn't so much teaching, it was just letting them live through my experiences. It was something I had to do for me, so I wouldn't think I was taking something away from them (Amy, p. 39).*

Modeling a respectful storytelling approach felt acceptable to Amy. It seemed to ease her discomfort. It also allowed her to live her life in line with who she wanted to be as a teacher, while reinforcing the self-shaping process she was engaged in:



*I think that is the same way that I am with young people in school in that I had finally found my purpose, my purpose was to teach, and I always knew that I wanted to teach (Amy, p. 29).*

Amy continued her conscious pursuit of self-shaping experiences and knowledge. She continued going to her Elders, teaching what she learned, and acting on the ever-surfacing questions that unfolded as she worked to live and tell a more “acceptable” self-story (Amy, p. 34). This spiraling cycle opened up her storyline to more personal challenges and dilemmas that would eventually come full circle by strengthening and affirming Amy’s sense of self:

*At least every month I would take my offering and I would go and I would ask my Elder Rose if this time in the sweat lodge I could receive my [Indian] name. It was like testing my patience I think because I waited for a very long time and I went faithfully and I went to fast and nothing happened.*

*One weekend, it was in the spring and I was in the sweat lodge, it was such an experience, I remember asking again what my name was and having the grandfather come to me in the sweat lodge to tell me my name. I was so afraid because he came on a horse and this horse felt like it was right in front of me, I was really afraid but I wasn't afraid, I don't know if that makes sense, I knew I wasn't going to be hurt or anything, but it frightened me.*

*And when I was given my name, I don't even know if I changed, but everything around me even the people around me were different. It had that much of an impact. I wanted to know more and they even gave me a color ... so I wanted to know more about that ... It was like I reached a point where what I had learned, I was teaching. Then when I received my name it was like another whole other learning experience because then I had to learn about the color and what it stood for.*

*Of course I didn't want ‘white’, I didn't want to be associated with anything ‘white’. I was still struggling with what I had learned about the missionaries and all of the awful things they had done and what all these young kids at school had done ... all of the grief that they had put me through, or I allowed myself to be put through. So of course I didn't want the color white and I didn't want to learn about it.*





*Then I started to learn ... and the way that I teach, what I do, and how I treat people now is ten times different than how I treated them when I was twenty-five or twenty-eight years old or even when I was thirty. I didn't want anybody else to know about Aboriginal culture, if you were non-Native, then I didn't want you to learn about this because we had all that taken away, 'you've' taken all of that away, so why would I want you to be learning it, you've taken it and I didn't want anybody to learn. Actually what I wanted was just for Aboriginal people to learn.*

*It was a growing experience ... and I learned more about the sacred circle and about the different colors and where I belonged ... it was just a whole new learning thing for me and of course I had a real attitude adjustment ...*

*My name is Medicine Spirit Horse Woman ...(Amy, p. 45-46).*

Amy was now living by a well-established learning ... teaching ... learning more storyline. She therefore continued on with her self-shaping “self-acceptance” process by teaching what she had learned about her name, “Medicine Spirit Horse Woman”, and in full circle fashion, she was inspired to learn even more as she shared of her self:

*It was such a long name ... and when I was learning about it ... I learned that Medicine is anything, it is the way we hug people and how we talk to people. That was a really big learning for me ... because I just spoke my mind and I was quite blunt with people, it was because I was learning so much and I wasn't about to let anybody get away with anything anymore.*

*I learned a lot from my name ... and I talked from my name a lot because I would ask kids what medicine meant to them. And then of course the question always came back to me, "What does it mean to you Ms. Amy?"*

*So then I would go listen to the old people talk about it, they weren't even teaching to me, I went to listen to them talk, and when I really listened, the message was always there. I wanted so much to learn about it ... and of course being the teacher, I was thinking, “Well I could have a whole lot of rebels on my hands depending on what I said!” I knew that I had to be really aware of what I was telling these kids because they were like little sponges, they were taking this information and soaking it up (Amy, p. 47).*



Amy took up the challenge to learn about the symbolic color 'white' despite her initial feelings of resentment. It too would prove to be a powerful self-shaping and self-healing learning:

*I learned about the circle and the inclusiveness of it and the colors, and the four races of man, and how we all fit in there, and how without that our circle would be broken. Having such a resentment as a young person growing up towards white people and then getting the color white, it was like I was sitting there and I was saying please any other color except white! They sent white! I wanted to just cry because I thought, "Now I have to learn about this!" But it was a really important learning because without white people in our circle, our circle was incomplete.*

*Then I had to teach this ... it took me a long time before I could teach the whole concept of the circle and the four races, or the four colors of man, because it was not what I wanted to teach. I wanted to just teach about Aboriginal people, I didn't want to teach about anybody else. It took a long time before I came to grips with the whole idea and concept of the circle and how we all belong ...*

Amy truly constructed her sense of who she wanted to become by engaging in a learning ... teaching ... and learning process. Like the many other examples of this self-shaping process, once again Amy authenticated and deepened her sense of a more than acceptable self by sharing her enriching knowledge with others:

*[This learning] hit home in 1990 when the Oka Crisis was happening. Edmonton Public Schools and some of the people were worried about what the Aboriginal students were going to do, or what they were going to say, or if there was going to be any sort of spill-over from this. And I was sitting in the meeting, and I often think that when I just allow the Creator to be the spokesperson for me, I never get into trouble.*

*I was sitting there and ... I said to all of the brass from downtown, "Well do you really think it's the Aboriginal people or our Aboriginal students that we need to be teaching to?" And it made them quiet and then I said, "Because us Aboriginal people, we know what's going on. We understand this, I don't think there's going to be any spill-over from it. If anything, it's going to be from the*



*non-Native community.” I was so busy that year, I just about died ... because those people went back and talked to principals about this wonderful idea ...*

*I understood it from my point what was happening, but it was the non-Native people who were fearing ... I talk about fear and it was either, we fight it, or we walk around it, but we don't ever look it right in the face and that's what we had to do. So by going in and talking and teaching about Native culture to non-Native students and telling them the truth ... I didn't want them to be sympathetic, I wanted them to be more empathetic to what those people were going through and what all Aboriginal people were going through. So then of course, by doing that, I had to teach about the circle (Amy, p. 69-70).*

The circle was truly an important symbol in Amy's unfolding life-story. She learned about the circle, she taught from the circle, the circle shaped her self-story, and ultimately, she constructed her story of who she wanted to become by living by a learning ... teaching ... and learning more spiraling process. This spiraling or circular self-shaping process was verified by Amy as she too described her self as having “come full circle”(Amy, p. 5):

*Learning about my culture, my roots, where I came from, and all the wonderful things I actually had to offer ... learning about that and then actually teaching it ... it was like coming full circle (Amy, p. 64).*



## Chapter Eight

### Living By A “Learning ... Teaching ... Learning More” Process:

#### *The Ongoing Process Of Creating A More Accepting Story Of Self*

Amy’s storytelling supported the notion that constructing and living by a desired story of self is a life-long process. It is an endeavor that requires continual effort and conscious action. Authoring a more “acceptable” story of self is a never-ending work in progress (p. 34). This is in large part because one is constantly invited into social situations that are being influenced or shaped by stories and histories of their own. We collide with these other stories, we mingle with them, sometimes we learn from them, and sometimes they harm us. But never are we left unaltered, or unshaped, by the stories being lived and told around us.

We are therefore wise to proceed with a learned and educated awareness, because by knowing who it is we want to become and how we want to live our life-story, we are less apt to succumb to the condescending and oppressive stories, and instead more consciously driven towards the plotlines that invite us to learn, heal, and create our desired life-story:

*When I was student teaching ... I would talk about teaching to “the whole person”, [as Elders often do], and of course the teachers would look at me a little different. Eventually my cooperating teacher said, “Now that you’re a teacher, are you still going to teach the same way?”*

*And I said, “I’ve always been a teacher.” I think that got him a little bit! But what I meant is, I’ve got the papers now, but I’ve always been a teacher.*

*Even the old people who teach me tell us, “Our young people are our best teachers.” And I tell the little kids and the junior high and high school kids this. It’s like a booster shot for them because they begin to develop a feeling*





*of importance, they discover that they have something important or that they can be helpful. And when you put this all on the wheel for them, to show them where they fit into the sacred circle, and when you show them what their responsibilities are, they become that way! (Amy, p. 8)*

By consciously teaching from, and living by, her own learned awareness, Amy was able to continuously enrich and strengthen her own self-story. In this way she practices her more than acceptable self-story each time she steps before a group of children, students, or fellow knowledge-seekers:

*So that is why I always encourage the young people, "If you young people really want to learn this, why don't you teach it to the person sitting beside you, just grab them and teach it to them!" (Amy, p. 9).*

For Amy, living a desired life-story, involved taking up a creation process that allowed her to remain open to learning from, and being shaped by, what she might call, "The Good Medicine Stories". This creation process also involved teaching from, acting on, and living by an ever-strengthening sense of her self that was awakened through her realization that, "there was something better" (Amy, p. 7). This creation process for Amy was a thickening and enriching process, as she learned she could move her self away from the non-sensical stories in order to live a life informed by pride. Amy reinforced this learned awareness through her teaching ... she was encouraged to deepen her learning and proud self-sense by continually engaging in this spiraling creation process. In this manner, Amy engages in an ongoing process of authenticating and grounding her more than acceptable self-story:

*I knew there was something better ... So now, I lose respect for people who are not accepting of who I am or who continually remind me that I am an*



*Indian, I don't hang around them anymore. I remove myself from situations like that or I try to teach them.*

*I never mean it to be harmful to them in any way ... One of the things that I am really mindful about when I talk to people is, "If I say anything that brings you any harm or shame or hurts you, that is not my intention." Our old people say that all the time, before they meet with people, before they light the pipes, before anything. And I think it is a good way of telling people that, "I'm saying this because it needs to be said, but it doesn't mean that I'm going to bring harm to your spirit."*

*I've learned more in the last fifteen years than I did in the first fifteen years of my life! (Amy, p. 7).*

By engaging in this creation process Amy has become more skilled at teaching, and protecting, her sense of self-acceptance from the harm that can come from the disempowering or misinformed stories being lived around her:

*My life has changed so much ... I always struggled with being me ... But I tell people now, I don't want to be that way anymore! I like who I am and I like my dark skin ... it just doesn't matter anymore. I have really become comfortable with me.*

*It always seemed like people would not let me forget "my place". They'd say, "Gee Amy, you're the only Native here!" ...*

*Now when friends say that to me I'll say, "So is there a place for me?" And they'll say, "What? Pardon?" And I'll say, "Well should I sit at the back of the room?"*

*But what I'm saying is, "What is the big deal with me being the only Native person here?"*

*So I'll say, "Well isn't that absolutely wonderful! You're not going to get rid of us that easily, are you?" Now I can joke about it, but I couldn't until I got really comfortable with me (Amy, p. 34-35).*

Amy continued to teach, learn, and live this empowering self-shaping process.

Subtly, yet very consciously, teaching those around her that shaping and living a



desired life begins with listening and learning, being open to knowledge, reinforcing desired self-shaping knowledge, and ultimately authoring an “acceptable” and consciously constructed story of who they want to become (p. 34):

*When I was student teaching ... I sat in other teachers' classes and I'd hear them laying down the rules ... I would think, "Oh my God! I don't have any rules, what am I going to do?" I worried about not saying the same things or at least saying this is what Mr. \_\_\_ says, so this is what we're going to do ...*

*But I thought if I just followed my heart, I would never be in trouble. So I told them the story about when my dad would tell us to get the cows and how he would draw, and I asked them if anybody had ever seen Navaho sand paintings and I said they're wonderful ... it was at that point that the kids who had their heads laying on their desks thinking, "Oh yeah, another student teacher", sat up and they started to listen.*

*But I told them the story about the sand paintings and I related it to how my dad never took a piece of paper and wrote on it, instead he drew where we had to go in the dirt. I said we had to listen and we had to watch what he was drawing because I wasn't going to carry that piece of dirt around with me. And so it was etched there.*

*What I was trying to relate to them was that we don't always have papers that we can refer back to, that we had to pay attention, and to listen with an open heart and an open mind, so that we wouldn't forget about the things people were telling us ... I was trying to bring the two worlds together in telling them we can't take that piece of dirt with us, or the Navaho people couldn't carry around that sand, but it had to be etched in their mind, and they had to listen because it was our survival and survival back then ...*

*So that was my opening story to the young people, telling them that it was their survival, our survival, in that we had to learn together. And I was totally amazed because I asked them to rub their ears and I said, "Now I want you to draw them," and when you take them and actually draw them it forms a heart. I said, "That's what you should be listening from, because if we listen from there, and we see from there, and we feel from there, and we think from there, people aren't going to be black, and people aren't going to eat different sandwiches, and they're not going to talk funny ... When we do all of those things from there, from our heart, we're not going to hurt anybody.*

*So, there were no rules, but there were all kinds of unspoken rules and I didn't have any problems at all keeping that class ... I've never talked about this*



*before with anybody. But there were all kinds of rules and those young people picked them up from there and maybe they didn't see them as rules, but it was laying out a foundation in terms of what I expected from them (Amy, p. 22-23).*

\*       \*       \*

This has been a story about a teacher. It has also been a story about the implications of being embedded within many other stories -- silenced stories, confusing stories, parallel stories, and re-discovered stories. But most of all, it has been a story about one woman's life-long endeavor to compose a more accepting and pride-informed story she can live within her self, and tell about her self, as she learns ... teaches ... and learns more about the sacred circle ... and who it is she wants to become.





## CHAPTER EIGHT

### REFLECTIONS WITH NARRATIVE THREADS

*It is a hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts ... whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 37).*

Stories of experience, from my own personal and professional life-text, sowed the seeds of curiosity that eventually grew into my desire to pursue this inquiry. As suggested by Heilbrun in her Writing A Woman's Life (1988), who I am as researcher, has been formed, and informed, through the texts of my own experiences. Therefore, my personal and professional experiences are what I bring to the sense-making process that shapes and informs the writing of this final chapter. That is, the stories that I live by, personally and professionally, become the lens through which I view and interpret the participants' narratives of experience. To borrow from Heilbrun, these stories that I live by, "are what [I] must use to make new fictions, new narratives" from the wealth of narrative phenomenon at hand (p. 37).

The intent, of the discussion that follows, is to put forward my reflections and insights, made possible through attempting to understand these women's stories, through my own stories of experience. I understand that if read through another individual's stories of experience, the reflections and insights gleaned would likely look and sound somewhat different. For this is the spirit of narrative inquiry. Having said this, it is in this spirit that I offer a discussion of my interpretive understandings. It is in this spirit that I consider the inquiry question: "How have women of



Aboriginal ancestry constructed a more coherent and desired sense of who they are, and who they want to become, in their stories of self?”

My discussion will unfold as follows. First I offer some thoughts regarding the multi-layered learning I experienced through this narrative inquiry. Then I discuss four of the narrative threads (or plotline commonalities) that, for me, suggest a sense of the processes experienced by these three women, and that seem to resonate with a beginning sense of what this could mean with regard to other Aboriginal, and perhaps minority, women. Integrated within this discussion, is my return to what other writers have said about women’s identity development, and that of Aboriginal women’s in particular. Next, I share my thoughts regarding implications for therapeutic practice and future research considerations. I take leave from this research story with a final comment regarding my own being and becoming.

### A Comment On Multi-Layered Learning

As my inquiry unfolded, I realized that important insights could be gleaned on both a content level and on a process level. Like good therapy, I came to view this research endeavor as an opportunity to develop knowledge from the stories each participant told (content) as well as from our collaborative in-the-moment meaning-making (process) that seemed to give way to further re-workings or re-constructions of their sense of identity. Like Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explained, true to the nature of this form of inquiry, “narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (p. 20).

On a content level, I was interested in stories about the experiences each participant identified as having been instrumental in their creation of a more coherent



and desired identity. What Michael White (1997) would refer to as the more “problem-saturated” stories were not so much my focus or interest, although I honored and respected that these various stories needed to initially be told in order to contextualize the explanatory telling of how each woman did go on to construct a different self sense apart from the versions that might have followed from the stories they each lived by as a child. Once each woman set the initial contextualizing content (the scene and plotline) for their life-story, I turned my focus towards what was of primary interest, the stories that illuminated the unique “authenticating” experiences that each viewed as having thickened and enriched their identities (White, 1997). From the expanded focus of my threesome, I wanted to explore the experientially shared (or common) threads that seemed to slice across their unique life-stories, so to deepen my understanding of their identity processes, and to inspire a beginning sense of how other Aboriginal, and minority, women might facilitate more coherent “stories to live by” (Heilbrun, 1988).

As I inquired into these women’s narratives of experience, that is, the content of their stories, I recognized that something quite important was occurring on an immediate process level. It became apparent that they were not only telling me their stories, that reflected a sense of their unfolding identity process, but they were each engaged in the very challenging and immediate process of re-configuring their sense of who they each were, how they had become the person before me on that given day, and what this immediate process might mean for who they wanted to become in their future versions of self. What I saw occurring before me was a beautiful example of the way in which the types of (content) stories we chose to tell, shapes, alters, and



informs the very ways we make sense of, or process, our beliefs about who and what we are. In this way, content and process were intricately tied. I understood that through my research practices with these women, I was also socially collaborating with them in the very process of continuing to construct and re-author their identities.

So, on a process level, I became very interested in the way that my narratively-influenced “re-membering” questions (White, 1997), and collaborative relationship ethics, shaped their immediate process of “locating, generating, or resurrecting alternative stories” that were “authenticating” and “thickening” of not just who they saw themselves to be, but also of who they wanted to become (p.16).

To quote White, narrative therapy “re-membering” conversations and practices:

*... provides opportunities for persons to more directly acknowledge the important and valued contributions that others have made to their lives ... And more than this, these practices of re-membering generally make it more possible for people to experience, in their day-to-day lives, the fuller presence of these figures ... The sense of being joined in this way, and of experiencing one's life more richly described, contributes to new possibilities for action in the world ...*

*In reviewing these associations, those knowledges and skills, and those accounts of identity, can be identified and explored in their particularities – the significant discoveries, realizations, conclusions, learnings, problem-solving practices, and so on, become more thickly described. This contributes very significantly to a person's sense of being knowledgeable, to the shaping of new proposals for action in their lives, and to specific expressions of these proposals (p. 23-24).*

In this sense, our narrative research process paralleled a narrative therapeutic process. However there did exist one significant difference between being engaged in a research process and being engaged in a therapy process with these women. That





difference being that these women did not approach me with the intent of engaging in therapy. Instead, I approached them with an invitation that they engage with me in my narrative inquiry. The implication of this meant that I was therefore responsible for clarifying with them my role as researcher, not therapist. In action this meant engaging in a research process that was empathetic, respectful, and sensitive as we collaborated in conversations around my research question. However, in my role as responsible and ethical researcher, I also needed to be cognizant of these women's inner experiences as they told stories of their difficult pasts. In this sense I saw my role as being supportive in the research moments, while facilitating referrals to other psychologists when storytelling had opened up inner experiences that required deeper processing in a formal and consensual therapy relationship.

#### Narrative Identity Process Thread:

##### From Very Early On They Tried To Live Life By An Identity That Made Sense

Slicing through the women's narratives was a distinct attempt to try to live a coherent life, despite the non-sensical elements of their earlier years. This thread of experience stood out as a significant commonality shared between their unique identity processes. From very early on each woman strived to compose a life of meaning and satisfaction. Each made attempts to adopt more fulfilling identity-scripts. However, due to the narrow, and in some instances confining script options available, their early desires to take up more satisfying identity-scripts seemed to necessitate modeling an identity after the very limited, yet familiar, scripts they saw being lived around them.



For each woman this seemed to mean, as one example, marrying at a very early age, spurred on by the hope that by adopting new identities within such relationships, they might flee their pain, and experience a more coherent and fulfilled self. However, in differing ways, each was to eventually realize that their adoption of the marry-early identity-script was not entirely facilitative of the identity they wanted to live by. Dina went on to marry and replicate the oppressive dynamics of her childhood home life, which she described as, “staying with what you’re familiar with” (Dina p. 47). Dina was to weave this process thread a few disappointing times, all the while hoping that each adoption of a wife-script identity would feed her yearning for a more accepting and empowered sense of self. Similarly, Amy adopted the marry-early identity script also to discover, a few occasions over, that by living what others “expected” and by what appeared “normal”, based upon the limited scripts she saw available around her, she really only continued to live by the non-accepting self sense she had initially attempted to flee (Amy, p. 7). Audrey married early as well. In her attempt to secure a fuller sense of what felt “missing” from her identity, she adopted a “big people” identity script at the young age of fifteen (Audrey, p. 15).

What affects me, regarding this thread of trying to live a life by an identity that made sense, is the way in which these women either ended up unintentionally re-creating the story of their desperate youth, the case for Dina and Amy, or for Audrey, prematurely moving into a script that may not have otherwise seemed such an immediate and tempting direction. I am struck by their tremendous desire, and tenacity, to be free of the non-sensical identity scripts they lived in their early years --



and to breakout and establish identities that made more sense. Moreover, I am left wondering how differently their early identity processes may have unfolded had there been other available life-story options at hand. Would they have been drawn into living by the “familiar”, “expected”, and “big people” stories, if they had before them other possibilities for creating and authenticating more empowering, fulfilling, and self-accepting identities?

As I reflect upon their narratives of experience, I am struck by the conflictual nature of this identity situation. On the one hand, these three women were clearly driven by an intense need for a more coherent sense of identity. As David Carr (1986) explained, “to the extent that we do not [find coherence], we aim for it, try to produce it, and try to restore it when it goes missing for whatever reason” (p. 90). Yet, on the other hand, for these women of Aboriginal ancestry, there appeared to be very limited alternative identity-scripts to chose from, upon leaving their old stories behind -- hence the conflict. Heilbrun (1988) in, Writing A Woman’s Life, and Bateson (1989) in, Composing A Life, both spoke of this complicated identity dilemma with regard to women more generally. Heilbrun described the desperate lengths women over the centuries have often resorted to in order to live a more desired identity-script, in the face of very few constraining options.

I see many similarities in the multiple identity conflicts women in general are pushed to grapple with. However, when laying my Aboriginal participants’ stories of challenge, conflict, and sparse choice, alongside the wider narratives of identity construction for women in general, I am reminded of the far greater complexity that comes with being an Aboriginal female embedded within grand historical and social



narratives that have additionally been about legally marginalizing (e.g. The Indian Acts) and stripping identity (e.g. residential schooling), and rights thereof, away from such women (Bartlett, 1988). When I turn to additional literature on other minority women, such as bell hook's (1989, 1990, 1993) work on the conflictual identity experiences of North American black women, I find that my current thinking is layered even more richly, as I consider the abhorrent damage done by oppressive grand narratives, or as hooks stated, "institutionalized structures of domination", that other minority women have been embedded within (p. 14).

I close my reflection on this thread with 1) far greater empathy for the multi-layered complexity that Aboriginal women, and minority women in general, wrestle with as they attempt to create identities that make sense and 2) a heightened sense of necessity and importance for facilitating a therapeutic process with minority women that is illuminating of alternative identity-scripts, and co-constructing of such scripts. For without a sense of choice, as my three participants demonstrated, there is a tendency to act on feelings of desperation by prematurely grasping hold of others, and the scripts they are living, for refuge or escape. Inherently problematic is that, an identity of empowerment, wholeness, and unity needs to be created, not located, so even when the relationships were good ones (e.g. Audrey's), the issue of developing a more complete sense of self, remained unresolved.

#### Narrative Identity Process Thread:

When They Moved Away From Taken-For-Granted Scripts, They Lived Outside Of Identity-Scripts ... A Difficult, But Necessary, In-Between Part Of Their Process





As difficult as it was for the three participants to live, for a time, outside of an identity-script, as I reflect upon their overall process, it does seem that the experience of being in this unsettling predicament, pushed each woman to eventually contemplate other ways of identifying themselves -- outside of locating an identity through the scripts lived by others. In her new book, Women's Lives: The View From The Threshold (1999), Heilbrun focused on women's experiences with this in-between time, which she referred to as being in a state of "liminality" ('limen' meaning 'threshold'). Heilbrun defined "liminality" as being:

*...poised upon uncertain ground, to be leaving one condition or country or self and entering upon another ... the most salient sign of liminality is its unsteadiness, its lack of clarity about exactly where one belongs and what one should be doing, or wants to be doing (1999, preface).*

Each of the women I spoke with described, in their own words, having experienced such a state of "liminality" at points of transition within their life-stories (Heilbrun, 1999). For Dina and Amy this part of the process was about leaving abusive and oppressive relationships, and for the first time being on their own, outside of an identity-in-relation. For Audrey, it was about letting go of the taken-for-granted assumption that she would naturally conceive a child, which gave way to her own contemplations with regard to who she might be, if not a mother. For these three women, woven through this phase of their identity process, was the experience of being forced to sort through intense feelings of pain, fear, and confusion – and as Heilbrun noted, "unsteadiness" (1999, preface).

However, through these difficulties, each was pushed to begin improvising ways of coping with the unthinkable and unexpected, rather than living by the



established scripts of others. Through these difficulties, they were challenged to pause, reflect, and begin to refine a beginning sense of who they might become, outside of what had traditionally been available. From this, a sense of esteem, a sense of ‘something better’, and an opening up to possibilities began to gradually surface in their awareness.

I take away a sense of delight for how, despite the adversity, these women began to gradually improvise and embrace a sense of choice, when they were forced to confront the reality of the uniquely conflictual identity situations they found themselves in. I am also struck by their resiliency, as evidenced by their refusal to give in to external pressures, or internal pains, which could have easily invited them back into the denial of old stories.

As I think about Dina and Amy’s process of dealing with the ambiguity of being in-between scripts, I am reminded of Heilbrun’s (1988) comments:

*I have read many moving lives of women, but they are painful, the price is high, the anxiety is intense, because there is no script to follow, no story portraying how one is to act, let alone any alternative stories (p. 39), [and later], There will be narratives of female lives only when women no longer live their lives isolated in the houses and stories of men (p. 47).*

As I think about Audrey’s different, yet painful, in-between struggle with her ‘if not a mother’ dilemma, I am struck by her strength and perseverance in letting go of the conventional form of living a mother-script, while creating an alternative way of making a motherhood story possible for herself. I find in Bateson’s (1989) Composing A Life, acknowledgment of this experience of uncertainty embedded within some women’s identity processes: “The problems of giving and receiving



needed care force everyone to improvisation and patchwork ... no longer attached to a fixed set of roles [or, in my words, no longer attached to a fixed set of conventional identity scripts]" (p. 143).

When I broaden my thinking to what is known about Aboriginal women's experiences, historically and socially, my impressions are deepened with regard to how tremendously difficult this scriptless, not-knowing, time must be. I pull the anthology, Writing The Circle: Native Women Of Western Canada (1990), off my shelf and review the rich collection of painful and inspiring writing within. Yes, I contend, when placed alongside the equally conflicted narratives told by other Aboriginal women, it is no small feat that these three women managed to improvise their way through this in-between time. When viewed through the grand historical and social narratives Aboriginal women have lived within, this narrative process thread resonates with an important, although seldom echoed, reminder of the resilient potential Aboriginal women can, and do, demonstrate.

I close my reflection on this thread with a deepened regard for the healing value that could be facilitated by simply inviting Aboriginal women to gather and exchange the improvisational ways they coped with their in-between story times, while attempting to make up alternative identity-scripts. Being that this in-between time was a shared experience for all three of these women, it could be argued that this thread also highlights the importance of normalizing, and even validating, this part of the process, in addition to supporting such women through the emotional and spiritual upheaval associated with such an uncertain time.



### Narrative Identity Process Thread:

#### They Experienced Gradual Awakenings That Strengthened Their Resolve To Figure Out And Create More Coherent and Desired Identity-Scripts

It needs to be emphasized that there was nothing neat and tidy, or linear, about these women's identity processes. Within the larger narrative of their own unique circumstances, they were seen to bounce back and forth, some more than others, repeatedly challenged with every new enterprise to figure out who they were going to be and who they wanted to become. Life, as it seemed, was an ongoing encounter with a series of self-created and externally imposed dilemmas, that challenged the in-the-moment scripts they were living, while pushing them to contemplate and work towards re-constructing newly defined and better fitting stories to live by (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Sometimes this process resulted in what they saw as success and fulfillment, other times the women struggled with re-authoring a more coherent and desired self-story, zig-zagging their identity-scripts back into familiar stories of dependency and regret.

However, as already emphasized, despite the setbacks they kept working at their identity-stories. They stayed awake to their gradually evolving realizations, refined their sense of consciousness, and eventually acted on information gleaned from their wake-up calls. This was evident in the action each took based upon a series of identity related wake-up calls that culminated in their realizations that; "Something had to be done" (Dina, p. 74), "There's got to be more to life than this" (Audrey, p. 12), and "There was something better" (Amy, p. 7).





What stands out as especially important are what seemed to facilitate the women staying awake to their conscious awareness, thus enabling them to begin to courageously act on their realizations. As I return to look at their narratives I am reminded of the facilitative importance of: validation and support offered by communal connecting with caring and sensitive family members (Amy, Audrey) and therapists (Dina); the power of touching one's anger and pain in order to thicken and assert one's commitment to do better what was wronged in the past (Dina); reframing family, health, career, and relationship crises as opportunities to act on desired change and growth (Dina, Audrey, Amy); and the inspirational insights gleaned from accessing alternative options through reading, courses, history, and teachings (Dina, Audrey, Amy).

My findings, with regard to elements facilitative of these three women becoming open and awake to the notion of re-constructing more desired identity-stories, fits with what Heilbrun (1988) and Bateson (1989) wrote about, from a narrative white middle class perspective: "Men tend to move on a fairly predictable path to achievement; women transform themselves only after an awakening" (Heilbrun, p. 118). My narrative findings also layer onto what Aboriginal writers, like Leslie Marmon Silko (1981, 1996), suggested as elements facilitative of wakefulness with regard to healing and empowerment for Aboriginal women. As Silko (1996) explained, in describing the sustaining identity process of her ancient Pueblo civilization:

*Through the stories we hear who we are ... the ancient people perceived the world and themselves within that world as part of an ancient, continuous story composed of innumerable bundles of other stories ... the vision of the world*



*was inclusive ... everything became a story ... thus the remembering and the retelling were a communal process ... people sought a communal truth, not an absolute truth. For them this truth lived somewhere within the web of differing versions ... (p. 30-32).*

In addition, I hear echoes of similarity in bell hooks (1993), Sisters Of The Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery, as she encouraged a return to the healing elements facilitative of “a firm grounding in self and identity” (p. 14):

*[In the past] conversation and storytelling were important locations for sharing information about the self, for healing ... It is important that black people talk to one another, that we talk with friends and allies, for the telling of our stories enables us to name our pain, our suffering, and to seek healing ... serving as a map, charting a journey that can lead us back to that place dark and deep within us, where we were first known and loved, where the arms that held us hold us still (p. 15-17).*

Resonating through these thoughts, is the ever important message of connectedness, for the wakefulness necessary in transitioning, is made possible in the validating and supportive context of coming into other possible scripts being lived, talked about, or set in the pages of fiction and history. The task then becomes weaving and improvising an identity-script that meets one’s own unique needs.

#### Narrative Identity Process Thread:

#### They Each Shifted From An Identity-As-A-Search Process To A More Empowering Identity-As-A-Creation Process

*For women who have awakened to new possibilities in middle age, or who were born into the current women’s movement and have escaped the usual rhythms of the once traditional female existence, the last third of life is likely to require new attitudes and new courage (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 124).*



Awakenings gave way to purposeful action that was seemingly informed by the evolving realization that living by more meaningful identity-scripts necessitated an ongoing creation process, rather than a location process. This shift in thinking unfolded in unique rhythms for each woman. For some the process ebbed and flowed before gaining a more consistent and evolving hold. For another, once realized, the process unfolded with a vigorous fury. However, what cut across each woman's holistic experience was a fundamental philosophical shift, from depending on and searching for completion and affirmation in the external world around them, to courageously engaging in an improvisational re-authoring process evolving from, and in reaction to, the complex narratives they found themselves nested within.

Through their words, I heard evidence of the "new attitudes and new courage" Heilbrun (1988) said would "be required" in writing a more desirable woman's life (p. 124). From Dina, on her re-construction of a more empowered identity: "What's there, you have to use ... I'm using everything that I've got! That to me is why I am where I am" (p. 87). From Audrey, on her re-construction of a more complete identity: "I can do better than this, I can do something about it, and I'm going to do it!" (p.58). And from Amy, on her re-construction of a more accepting identity: "Learning about all the wonderful things I actually had to offer ... and then teaching it ... was like coming full circle" (p. 64).

After a series of extractions from initially confining conventional scripts, they each re-constructed more tellable and livable self-stories by actively layering upon, thickening, and authenticating the versions of self they wanted to live their lives by.



Interestingly, their artful re-creation processes could each be viewed as having similar facilitative elements and practices as those emphasized by family therapist Michael White (1997), referred to as “re-membering practices” (p. 23-24). However, of distinct difference, is the fact that a therapist was not involved in any way during this phase of the process. These women engaged in their unique practices from an intuitively shaped, intuitively informed, self-initiated and self-propelled process. I see this worthy of mention since, outside of the traditionally facilitated therapy process, these women each eventually figured out, as they went along, what they needed and what could help them meet their needs. They then acted on this inner wisdom.

I highlight this point because I think it is a beautiful example of a therapeutic process principle that, when overlooked, leads to far-reaching and damaging outcomes. More to the point, I see, through these women’s narratives, a sweet resonation of the fragile importance of trusting our clients’ senses, of facilitating a process with clients, especially when cross-culturally, that is collaboratively guided by their intuitions. This principle of working from the client’s wisdoms and person-centered knowledges, supported through the narratives shared within, not only lends itself to more respectful and empowering ways of working, but also, from my experience, more meaningful and effective outcomes.

I turn now to what stands out as the shared experiences, between the three women, that seem to resonate with a sense of how they facilitated their identity-as-a-creation process. I make use of White’s (1997) lens of “re-membering practices”, since I see this frame as a meaningful way to make sense of the experiences I have





heard. (An explanation of “re-membering practices” as quoted from White can be found on page 199 of this dissertation.)

White (1997) believes that “re-membering practices” facilitates identities becoming more thickly-described and authenticated. In his narrative therapy conversations, he engages in “re-membering” practices by making use of questions that bring forth client dialogue and memories with regard to present and past relationships that have positively influenced and skilled one’s life in some sustaining manner. By thickening and enriching the telling of these relationships, White facilitates the client re-membering and informing his/her life with the sort of information that can serve to authenticate one’s identity in a more desired fashion.

I am again reminded of how the narrative therapy lens layers fittingly onto the wisdoms of Aboriginal culture, when I return to a quote by Pueblo Elder, Leslie Marmon Silko (1996): “The stories were valuable because they taught us how we were the people we believed [or wanted to believe] we were. The myth, the web of memories and ideas that create an identity, is a part of oneself (p. 43).

Returning to my three participants, through their own instincts and curiosities, they seemed to initiate and carry on unfolding identity processes that are remarkably reflective of how White suggested we invite focus with therapy clients. In other words, in their own self-facilitated and unique ways, these highly motivated women:

*Directly acknowledged the important and valued contributions that others made to their lives ... [making] it more possible for [them] to experience, in their day-to-day lives, the fuller presence of [these meaningful] figures ... [thus contributing to] a sense of being joined, and of experiencing one’s life more richly described ... [leading to] significant discoveries, realizations, conclusions, learnings, problem-solving practices, and so on becoming more thickly described (White, 1997, p. 23-24).*



More specifically, the women pursued, with intent, self-shaping and self-defining experiences that included: re-connecting with the gaps and silences from their missing pasts through acquiring cultural/historical/genealogical knowledge and ancestral/familial stories and traditions; connecting with understanding and support through relationships with mentors, family, and friends; and ultimately “weaving and mending” (Cameron, 1981) these fitting strands of inspiration, knowledge, stories, and experiences into the ever-evolving tapestry they chose to inform their being and their becoming.

Through this improvisational process the unfolding possibilities were many. The alternative scripts available for living were multiplied. Like any artistic endeavor, they could not foresee or predict the directions they would go, or the identity-scripts they would be living from one challenge to the next. However, while they may not have known where the process would definitively take them, they did seem well aware of the empowering dynamics fueling their onward thrust.

The identity practices lived and told by these three Aboriginal participants, precariously situated in the midst of their unfolding and complex lives, echoes with the traditional wisdoms shared by the Elders, while also resonating an edgy inventiveness, a post-modern subjectivity, that necessities sometimes making it up as you go, sometimes borrowing from the past, and sometimes envisioning and acting on future possibilities.



### Implications For Counselling

I have already offered a sense of some implications for counselling practice. As I see it, the implications taken from this narrative inquiry surfaced in relation to the layered outcomes of both the narrative content, illuminating a sense of the women's identity processes, as well as through the dynamics of the collaborative research process. Content about process, and process while telling about content, gradually paralleled one another, becoming increasingly entwined and inseparable, reciprocally influencing and shaping the outcome.

That is, my research approach with these women invited a "re-membering" (White, 1997) process, which seemed both effective and "transformative" (Dina, phone conversation). Of equal importance was that while my participants shared content from their life experience, their stories suggested they developed their more desirable identities through a process that was reflective of having self-initiated and lived a "re-membering" process.

Why do I stress this as important? Because I think this point lays the foundation for any implications being pulled from my inquiry. More specifically, I think it could be argued that this dual story-within-story inquiry doubly highlights the therapeutic importance of collaboratively facilitating a healing process with Aboriginal women, and others desiring of an alternative sense of self, that in some way cultivates the essence of what has been resonated within.

I am not suggesting new ideas or new therapeutic principles, but rather an invitation to engage with minority women in therapeutic practice informed by the resonations rippling out from these stories of what does, or could, facilitate a more



meaningful sense of identity. Based upon my dual story-within-story experience, these resonations seem to sound and look something like this ~ ~ ~

Trust the client's wisdoms ... Explore and thicken healing and authenticating stories ... Inquire into inspirational ancestral stories ... Promote deeper relationships with mentors ... Encourage genealogical searches ... Image and author stories for the future ... Practice and model consciousness ... Make use of meaningful metaphors ... Share stories as a group ... Be aware of, and sensitive to, the grand narratives that often affect minorities ... Gently educate when appropriate ... Approach every individual as a one of a kind story ... Introduce alternative identity-scripts through film, song, fiction, history, and current events ... Learn to weave and mend ... Honor and respect the stories that need to be told ... Support the emotional process ... Resurrect what worked in the past ... Listen to Elders ... Find ways to reach the children ... Validate attempts to live with meaning and intent ... Frame challenge as opportunity ... Normalize the in-between times ... Collaborate in the creation of options ... Co-create resiliency ... Empathize zig-zags in the process ... Channel anger into assertiveness ... Work with content and process ...

### Considerations For Future Research

It is my hope that further research, on minority women's identity processes, be pursued, so to thicken and layer onto the narratives of experience presented here. As my participants hinted, Aboriginal women will, and can, create more empowered, complete, and accepting identities when these sorts of scripts are available to see,





hear, and read about. Availability of such alternative material is necessary so to inform an improvisational re-authoring process. Narrative inquiry process portraits also need to be increasingly laid alongside others, so to inform therapeutic theory and practice, with the rich resonations of both “productive idiosyncrasy” and threads of shared experience (Barone & Eisner, 1998, p. 39).

### A Closing Comment On Being And Becoming

I take my leave from this research story with a sense of deep gratitude to the women who shared their lives with me. The resonations from this experience have deepened my own sense of who I am and who I hope to become, personally and professionally. *Kitatahmihin.*



*From "The Face Of Old Woman"*

*There are Women everywhere with fragments  
gather fragments  
weave and mend*

*When we learn to come together we are whole  
we will know what we need to know  
to learn how to come together  
to learn how to weave and mend*

*Old Woman is watching  
Watching over you  
in the darkness of the storm  
she is watching  
watching over you  
  
weave and mend  
weave and mend*

*Old Woman is watching  
watching over you  
with her bones become a loom  
she is weaving  
watching over us  
weave and mend  
golden circle  
weave and mend  
sacred sisters  
weave and mend*

*I have been searching  
lost  
alone  
I have been searching  
for so many years*

*I have been searching  
Old Woman*

*And I find her  
in  
mySelf*

*(From Cameron's 1981, Daughters of Copper Woman, p. 149-150)*



## REFERENCES

- Anderson, H. (1993). On a roller coaster: A collaborative language systems approach to therapy. In S. Friedman (Ed.), The new language of change: Constructive collaboration in psychotherapy. (pp 323-344) New York: Guilford Press.
- Archibald, J. (1992). Editorial: Giving voice to our ancestors. The Journal of Native Education, 19, 141-149.
- Barone, T. & Eisner, E. (1998). Arts-based educational research. A paper distributed by Eisner at an Arts-Based Seminar sponsored by A.E.R.A. in Tempe, Arizona.
- Bartlett, R. (1988). The Indian act of Canada. Saskatchewan: University of Saskatchewan Native Law Centre.
- Bateson, M.C. (1989). Composing a life. New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Billson, J.M. (1995). Keepers of the culture: The power of tradition in women's lives. New York: Lexington Books.
- Bruchac, J. (1993). Notes of a translator's son. In P. Riley (Ed.), Growing up Native American: An anthology. (pp 237-246). New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.
- Cameron, A. (1981). Daughters of copper woman. Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers.
- Carr, D. (1986). Time, narrative, and history. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Clandinin, D.J. & Connelly, F.M. (1988). Studying teachers' knowledge of the classroom: Collaborative research, ethics, and the negotiation of narrative. The Journal of Educational Thought, 1988, 22 (2A), 269-282.
- Clandinin, D.J. & Connelly, F.M. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. Educational Researcher, 19, 2-14.
- Clandinin, D.J., Davies, A., Hogan, P. & Kennard, B. (1993). Learning to teach, teaching to learn. New York: Teachers College Press.



Clandinin, D.J. & Connelly, F.M. (1994). Personal experience methods. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln's (Ed.), Handbook of qualitative research. (pp 413-427). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Clandinin, D.J. & Connelly, F.M.(2000). Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Clandinin, D.J. & Connelly, F.M. (1995). Teachers' professional knowledge landscapes. New York: Teachers College Press.

Conle, C. (1996). Resonance in preservice teacher inquiry. American Educational Research Journal, vol. 33, No. 2, 297-325.

Connelly, F.M. & Clandinin, D.J. (1999). Shaping a professional identity: Stories of educational practice. New York: Teachers College Press.

Connelly, F.M. & Clandinin, D.J. (1986). On narrative method, personal philosophy, and narrative unities in the story of teaching. Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 23, 293-310.

Connelly, F.M. & Clandinin, D.J. (1988). Teachers as curriculum planners: Narratives of experience. New York: Teachers College Press.

Coulson, J., Carr, C., Hutchinson, L., & Eagle, D. (Ed.). (1982). The Oxford Illustrated Dictionary (6th ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Cruikshank, J. (1990). Life lived like a story: Life stories of three Yukon Native Elders. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.

Epston, D., White, M., & Murray, K. (1992). A proposal for a re-authoring therapy: Rose's revisioning of her life and a commentary. In S. McNamee & K.J. Gergen (Eds.), Therapy as social construction. (pp 96-115). London: Sage Publications.

Eron, J. & Lund, T. (1996). Narrative solutions in brief therapy. New York: The Guilford Press.

Freedman, J. & Combs, G. (1996) Narrative therapy: The social construction of preferred realities. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

Geertz, C. (1973). Thick description: Toward an interpretative theory of culture. In C. Geertz, The interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books.

Geertz, C. (1983). Local knowledge: Further essays in interpretive anthropology. New York: Basic Books.





Geertz, C. (1986). Making experiences, authoring selves. In E. Bruner & V. Turner (Eds.), The anthropology of experience. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Geertz, C. (1995). After the fact: Two countries, four decades, one anthropologist. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Gunn Allen, P. (1989). Spider woman's granddaughters: Traditional tales and contemporary writing by Native American women. New York: Fawcett Columbine Books.

Haig-Brown, C. & Robert, S. (1992). "Sophie Robert": Remembrances of Secwepemc life. The Journal of Native Education, 19, 175-214.

Heilbrun, C.G. (1988). Writing a woman's life. New York: Ballantine Books.

Heilbrun, C.G. (1999). Women's lives: The view from the threshold. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Hernandez, I. (1993). Foreword. Reflections on identity and culture. In P. Riley (Ed.), Growing up Native American: An anthology. (pp 7-16). New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.

Hilden, P. (1995). When nickels were Indians: An urban, mixed-blood story. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

hooks, b. (1989). Talking back. Boston: South End Press.

hooks, b. (1990). Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics. Toronto: Between The Lines.

hooks, b. (1993). Sisters of the yam: Black women and self-recovery. Toronto: Between The Lines.

Howard, G. (1991). Culture tales: A narrative approach to thinking, cross-cultural psychology, and psychotherapy. American Psychologist, 46, 187-197.

Jamieson, K. (1978). Indian women and the law in Canada: Citizens minus. A document from the council on the status of women & rights for Indian women. Minister of Supply and Services Canada.

Johnston, B. (1989). Indian school days. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press.

Kimelman, Judge E. (1985). No quiet place: Review committee on Indian and Metis adoptions and placements. A final report to the honorable Muriel Smith minister of community services. Manitoba Community Services.



Lame Deer & Erdoes, R. (1972). Lame Deer: Seeker of visions. In P. Riley (Ed.), Growing up Native American: An anthology. (pp 135-149). New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.

LaRocque, E. (1990). Preface: Here are our voices -- who will hear?. In J. Perreault & S. Vance (Eds.), Writing the circle. (pp xv-xxx). Edmonton, Alberta: NeWest Publishers.

Lax, W. (1992). Postmodern thinking in a clinical practice. In S. McNamee & K.J. Gergen (Eds.), Therapy as social construction. (pp 69-85). London: Sage Publications.

Mair, M. (1988). Psychology as storytelling. International Journal of Personal Construct Psychology, 1, 125-138.

Meili, D. (1991). Those who know: Profiles of Alberta's Native elders. Edmonton: NeWest Publishers Limited.

Miller, N. (1988). Subject to change: Reading feminist writing. New York: Columbia University Press.

Monk, G., Winslade, J., Crocket, K., & Epston, D. (1997). Narrative therapy in practice. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Myerhoff, B. (1982). Life history among the elderly: Performance, visibility and remembering. In J. Ruby (Ed), A crack in the mirror: Reflexive perspectives in anthropology. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Nichols, M. & Schwartz, R. (Eds.). (1995). Family therapy: Concepts and methods, third edition. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Pare, D. (1997). The narrative metaphor in post-modern therapy. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Alberta.

Parry, A. & Doan, R. (1994). Story re-visions: Narrative therapy in the postmodern world. New York: The Guilford Press.

Perreault, J. & Vance, S. (Eds.). (1990). Writing the circle. Edmonton, Alberta: NeWest Publishers.

Riley, P. (1993). Growing up Native American: An anthology. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.



Robson, R. (1989). Bill C31 and its impact on the northern community. In, Institute of urban studies newsletter, (publication No. 28, pp.2-3). Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Silko, L.M. (1981). Storyteller. New York: Seaver Books.

Silko, L.M. (1996). Yellow woman and a beauty of the spirit: Essays on Native American life today. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Wax, M. (1991). The ethics of research in American Indian communities. American Indian Quarterly, Fall, 1991.

White, M. & Epston, D. (1990). Narrative means to therapeutic ends. New York: W.W. Norton.

White, M. (1995). Re-authoring lives: Interview & Essays. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

White, M. (1997). Narratives of therapists' lives. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

Wiebe, R. & Johnson, Y. (1998). Stolen life: The journey of a Cree woman. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada.

Wood, R. (1996). Scenes of togetherness: A Cree Elders philosophy of health and healing. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.

Wyrostok, N. (1997). First nations women: A case study. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.

York, G. (1989). The dispossessed: Life and death in Native Canada. Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys Publishers.

Zimmerman, J. & Dickerson, V. (1994). Using a narrative metaphor: Implications for theory and clinical practice. Family Process, 33, 233-245.



## APPENDIX

### Aboriginal Women's Identity Experiences: Participant Consent Form

This consent form outlines important information you will need to understand in order to make an informed decision with regard to participation in this research.

I am a Ph.D. student in the Counselling Psychology program at the University of Alberta. As part of my program requirements, I will carry out research and present my findings in a written document called a dissertation.

I am interested in the topic of identity; that is I am interested in the way people formulate an answer to the question 'who am I'? I believe that our sense of who we are is shaped by the stories we tell about ourselves. My research will explore how three women of Aboriginal ancestry have constructed their stories of who they are. I will do this research by meeting with each woman about 5-6 times (these conversations will be completed by July 1998) in order to tape-record the stories each tells in response to the question: **Looking back, what stories would you tell in order to explain your sense of who you are?**

As a counsellor who works with Aboriginal people, and who is also Metis, I believe this research could provide myself and other therapists with important insights into how Aboriginal women make sense of who they are. The outcomes of this research will likely help counsellors better understand the experiences of women of Aboriginal descent. Insights from this research may also help counsellors enhance ideas for working with Aboriginal people who struggle with identity issues.

If you participate in this research, you have a right to withdrawal from the study at any time and for whatever reason without any penalty. You also have the right to remain anonymous in the research and dissertation document; your name and identity could be disguised if you desired. As well, any personal information shared during the tape-recorded conversations will remain confidential if you so choose. By notifying me, I will withhold any information from the dissertation if you ever decide something should remain confidential. My home phone number is 439-5735.

If you would like to participate in this study, upon receiving this written and verbal explanation of the research and your rights, please sign your name below. Your signature will be proof that you have opted to engage in this research as an informed participant.

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

















University of Alberta Library



0 1620 1603 6780

**B45531**